

GEORGES SIMENON

The Saint-Fiacre Affair

INSPECTOR MAIGRET





Georges Simenon

THE SAINT-FIACRE AFFAIR

Translated by Shaun Whiteside



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EXTRA: Chapter 1 from *The Flemish House*

PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE SAINT-FIACRE AFFAIR

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points ... 'understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.



1. The Little Cross-Eyed Girl

A timid knock at the door; the sound of something being set down on the floor; a furtive voice:

‘It’s half past five! The first bell has just rung for mass ...’

Maigret propped himself on his elbows, and as he looked in amazement at the skylight that pierced the sloping roof the voice continued:

‘Are you taking communion?’

Detective Chief Inspector Maigret was standing up now, barefoot on the freezing floor. He walked towards the door, held shut with a piece of string rolled around two nails. There was the sound of scurrying footsteps, and when he looked into the corridor he caught a glimpse of a woman in a camisole and a white skirt.

Then he picked up the jug of hot water that Marie Tatin had left him, closed his door and looked around for a mirror to shave in.

The candle only had a few minutes left to live. Outside the skylight it was still pitch dark, a cold night in early winter. A few dead leaves still clung to the branches of the poplars in the main square.

Because of the double slope of the ceiling, Maigret could only stand upright in the middle of the attic room. He was cold. All night a draught whose source he had not been able to identify had left him with a chill on the back of his neck.

But precisely that quality of cold unsettled him, plunging him into a mood that he thought was forgotten.

The first bell for mass ... Chimes over the sleeping village ... When he was a little boy, Maigret hadn’t got up so early. He used to wait for the second chime,

at a quarter to six, because in those days he didn't need to shave. Had he only washed his face?

No one brought any hot water in those days. Sometimes the water was frozen in the jug. A little while later his shoes would echo on the metalled road.

Now, as he got dressed, he heard Marie Tatin coming and going in the front of the inn, shaking the grate of the stove, clattering the dishes, turning the coffee mill.

He put on his jacket and his coat. Before going out he took from his briefcase a piece of paper with an official label attached:

Municipal Police of Moulins.

Issued for any eventuality to the Police Judiciaire, Paris.

Then a squared sheet. Meticulous handwriting:

I wish to inform you that a crime will be committed at the church of Saint-Fiacre during first mass on All Souls' Day.

The piece of paper had been hanging around the offices of the Quai des Orfèvres for several days. Maigret had noticed it by chance and been taken aback.

'Saint-Fiacre, near Matignon?'

'Probably, because it reached us via Moulins.'

And Maigret had put the paper in his pocket. Saint-Fiacre! Matignon! Moulins! Words more familiar to him than any others.

Saint-Fiacre was the place of his birth, where his father had been estate manager of the chateau for thirty years! The last time he had gone there had been, in fact, after the death of his father, who had been buried in the little cemetery, behind the church.

A crime will be committed ... during first mass ...

Maigret had arrived the previous day. He had put up at the only inn, the one that belonged to Marie Tatin.

She hadn't recognized him, but he had recognized her, from her eyes. The little cross-eyed girl, as she had been called back then. A skinny little girl who had become an even thinner old maid with an even worse squint, moving endlessly around in the front room, in the kitchen, in the farmyard where she raised rabbits and chickens.

The inspector went down the stairs. At the bottom, the inn was lit by paraffin lights. The table was laid in a corner. Some coarse grey bread. A smell of chicory

coffee, boiling milk.

‘You’re wrong not to take communion on a day like today! Especially when you take the trouble to go to the first mass ... Heavens! There’s the second peal!’

The bells rang out faintly. There was a sound of footsteps in the road. Marie Tatin fled to her kitchen to put on her black dress, her lace gloves, the little hat which refused to sit straight on her bun.

‘I’ll let you finish eating. Will you lock the door behind you?’

‘No need! I’m ready.’

How confused she was to find herself walking along the road with a man. A man who had come from Paris! She took tiny steps, leaning forwards in the cold morning. Dead leaves somersaulted on the ground. Their dry rustle suggested frost in the night.

Other shadows converged towards the faint light from the church door. The bells were still ringing. There were some lights in the windows of the single-storey houses: people hastily getting dressed for first mass.

And Maigret savoured the sensations of his youth again: the cold, stinging eyes, frozen fingertips, an aftertaste of coffee. Then, stepping inside the church, a blast of heat, soft light; the smell of candles and incense ...

‘Please excuse me. I’ve got my prie-dieu,’ said his companion.

And Maigret recognized the black chair with the red velvet arm-rest, the one that had belonged to old Tatin, the cross-eyed girl’s mother.

The rope that the bell-ringer had pulled a few moments before still quivered at the end of the church. The sacristan had just finished lighting the candles.

How many were they, in this ghostly gathering of bleary-eyed people? Fifteen at most. There were only three men: the sexton, the bell-ringer and Maigret.

... a crime will be committed ...

In Moulins, the police had assumed it was a bad joke and hadn’t been concerned about it. In Paris, they’d been amazed when the inspector followed it up.

He heard a noise coming from the door to the right of the altar and could guess, second by second, what was going on: the sacristy, the tardy altar boy, the priest silently putting on his chasuble, placing his hands together in prayer, heading towards the nave, followed by the little boy tottering in his robe.

The little boy had red hair. He rang the bell. The murmur of liturgical prayers began.

... during first mass ...

Maigret had looked at all the shadows, one by one. Five old women, three with their own reserved prie-dieu. A fat farmer's wife. Some younger village girls and a child ...

The noise of a car, outside. The creak of a door. Small, light steps and a woman in mourning dress walking all the way across the church.

In the chancel there was a row reserved for the people from the chateau: hard pews of polished old wood. And it was there that the woman sat down, without a sound, followed by the eyes of the village women.

'Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine ...'

Maigret could still have given the response. He smiled at the thought that he had once preferred requiem masses to the others, because the prayers are shorter. He could remember masses lasting only sixteen minutes!

But already his eyes were fixed on the occupant of the gothic pew. He could barely see her profile. He didn't at first recognize the Countess of Saint-Fiacre.

'Dies irae, dies illa ...'

But it was, it was her! The last time he had seen her she had been twenty-five or twenty-six. She was a tall, thin, melancholic woman, only ever seen from a distance in the grounds of the chateau.

And now she must have been at least sixty. She prayed ardently. Her face was emaciated, her hands too long, too refined, clutching a rosary.

Maigret had stayed in the back row of straw chairs, the ones that cost five centimes at high mass but are free at low mass.

... a crime will be committed ...

He stood up with the others for the first reading from the Gospel. Details crowded in from all directions, and memories flooded over him. He suddenly found himself thinking:

'On All Souls' Day, the same priest celebrates three masses ...'

Back in his day, he had had lunch at the priest's house, between the second and the third. A boiled egg and goat's cheese!

The Moulins police were right after all. There could be no crime! The sacristan had taken his seat at the end of the pew, four seats away from the

countess. The bell-ringer had walked flat-footedly away, like a theatre director who doesn't care to watch his play.

The only men left were Maigret and the priest, a young man with the passionate gaze of a mystic. He was in no hurry, unlike the old priest that the inspector had known. He didn't leave out half the verses.

The stained-glass windows paled. Day was breaking outside. A cow lowed in a farm.

And soon everyone bowed their heads for the Elevation of the Host. The altar boy's shrill bell rang out.

Maigret was the only one not to take communion. All the women stepped towards the communion rail, hands clasped, faces closed. The hosts had a pale, almost unreal gleam as the priest held them momentarily in his hand.

The service continued. The countess held her face in her hands.

'Pater Noster ... Et ne nos inducas in tentationem ...'

The old lady parted her fingers, revealing her tormented face, and opened her missal.

Four minutes to go! The prayers. The last reading. And that would be it. And there would have been no crime!

Because the warning said: *first mass ...*

The proof that it was over was the sexton rising to his feet and stepping inside the sacristy.

The Countess of Saint-Fiacre had put her head in her hands again. She didn't move. Most of the other old women were as motionless as she was.

'Ite missa est.' ... 'The mass has been said.'

It was only then that Maigret realized how anxious he had been. It had only now caught up with him. He gave an involuntary sigh. He couldn't wait for the end of the last reading and was looking forward to breathing the fresh outside air, seeing people moving about, talking about this and that.

The old women woke up all at the same time. Feet moved on the cold blue tiles of the church. First one village girl headed for the exit, then another. The sacristan appeared with a snuffer, and a thread of blue smoke replaced the candle-flames.

Day had broken. A grey light entered the nave along with the cold air.

There were still three people. Two. A chair moved. Then the only one left was the countess, and Maigret's nerves tightened with impatience.

The sacristan, who had finished his task, looked at Madame de Saint-Fiacre. A look of hesitation flickered across his face. At the same time the inspector stepped forwards.

They were both quite close to her, startled by her stillness, trying to see the face hidden by the clasped hands.

Worried, Maigret touched her shoulder. And the body tilted, as if nothing had been holding it upright, then rolled to the ground and lay there inert.

The Countess of Saint-Fiacre was dead.

They had carried the body to the sacristy and laid it on three chairs set side by side. The sacristan had run to fetch the village doctor.

And Maigret forgot how uncanny his presence was. He took a few minutes to understand the suspicious question in the priest's ardent gaze.

'Who are you?' he asked at last. 'What brings ...'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire.'

He looked the priest in the face. He was a man of thirty-five, with features that were regular but so serious that they suggested the unshakeable faith of monks from another age.

He was deeply troubled. His voice less firm, he murmured, 'You don't mean that? ...'

They had not yet dared to undress the countess. They had put a mirror to her lips, to no avail. They had listened to her heart, which had stopped beating.

'I see no wounds,' was all Maigret said in reply.

And he looked around him at this setting, not a detail of which had changed in thirty years. The cruets were in the same place and the chasuble ready for the next mass, and the altar boy's cassock and surplice.

The gloomy daylight, entering through an ogive window, diluted the rays from an oil lamp.

It was hot and cold at once. The priest was clearly gripped by terrible thoughts.

'But you're not trying to say that ...'

What a drama! At first Maigret didn't understand. But memories from his childhood rose up like bubbles.

A church where a crime has been committed has to be reconsecrated by the bishop ...

How could there have been a crime? There had been no gunshot! No one had gone near the countess. Throughout the whole of the mass, Maigret hadn't taken his eyes off her.

And no blood had been spilled; there was no apparent wound!

'The second mass is at seven o'clock, isn't it?'

It was a relief to hear the heavy tread of the doctor, a red-faced chap who was struck by the atmosphere and who looked at the inspector and the priest in turn.

'Dead?' he asked.

But he had no hesitation in undoing her bodice, while the priest averted his eyes. Heavy footsteps in the church. Then the peal rung by the bell-ringer. The first chime of the seven o'clock mass.

'All I see is an embolism that would have ... I wasn't the countess's regular doctor; she preferred to be treated by a colleague in Moulins. But I was called to the chateau two or three times. Her heart was in very poor shape.'

The sacristy was very cramped. There was hardly enough room for the three men and the body. Two altar boys arrived, because there was mass at seven.

'Her car must be outside,' said Maigret. 'We'll have to have her taken home.'

And he still felt the priest's anxious eyes on him. Had he guessed something? Either way, while the sacristan, with the help of the driver, guided the body towards the car, he approached the inspector.

'Are you sure that ... I still have two masses to say. It's All Souls' Day. My congregation is ...'

Since the countess had died of an embolism, couldn't Maigret find it in himself to reassure the priest?

'You heard what the doctor said ...'

'And yet you've come here today, to this very mass ...'

Maigret tried to stay calm.

'A coincidence, Father ... My father is buried in your cemetery.'

And he hurried towards the car, an old-model coupé. The chauffeur was turning the crank. The doctor didn't know what to do. There were a few people

in the square who had no idea what was happening.

‘Come with us ...’

But the corpse took up all the room inside the car. Maigret and the doctor crammed themselves in beside the driver’s seat.

‘You look surprised by what I said,’ murmured the doctor, who hadn’t yet regained all his confidence. ‘If you knew the situation you might understand ... The countess ...’

He fell silent, glancing at the black-liveried chauffeur, who was absently driving his car. They crossed the sloping square, bounded on one side by the church built on the incline, on the other by the Notre-Dame pond, which was a poisonous grey that morning.

Marie Tatin’s inn was on the right, the first house in the village. On the left there was an avenue lined with oaks and, at the end, the dark mass of the chateau.

A uniform sky, cold as a skating-rink.

‘You know this is going to cause a fuss ... That’s why the priest is pulling such a face ...’

Dr Bouchardon was a peasant, and the son of peasants. He wore a brown hunting suit and high rubber boots.

‘I was going duck-hunting in the ponds ...’

‘You don’t go to mass?’

The doctor glanced at him.

‘It didn’t stop me being friends with the old priest ... But this one ...’

They entered the grounds. The details of the chateau could be seen now: the ground-floor windows obscured by shutters, the two corner towers, the only old parts of the building.

When the car parked near the steps, Maigret peered through the barred basement windows and saw kitchens full of steam, and a fat woman busy plucking partridges.

The driver didn’t know what to do and didn’t dare open the doors of the car.

‘Monsieur Jean isn’t up yet ...’

‘Call anyone ... Are there any other servants in the house? ...’

Maigret was sniffing. It was really cold. He stood in the courtyard with the doctor, who started stuffing a pipe.

‘Who is Monsieur Jean?’

Bouchardon shrugged and gave a strange smile.

‘You’ll see.’

‘No, tell me, who is he?’

‘A young man ... A charming young man ...’

‘A relative?’

‘If you like! ... In his own way! ... Well, why don’t I get it out of the way ... He’s the countess’s lover ... officially, he’s her secretary ...’

And Maigret looked the doctor in the eye, remembering that they had been to school together. Only, no one recognized him. He was forty-two! He had put on some weight.

He knew the chateau better than anyone. Especially the servants’ quarters. He had to take only a few steps to see the estate manager’s house, his birthplace.

And perhaps it was the memories that troubled him so much! Especially the memory of the Countess of Saint-Fiacre as he had known her: a young woman who had personified, to the working-class little boy that he was, femininity, grace, nobility ...

And she was dead! She had been pushed, like an inert object, into the car, and they had had to fold her legs. They hadn’t even buttoned up her blouse, and white underwear contrasted with the black of her mourning dress!

... a crime will be committed ...

But the doctor claimed that she had died of an embolism. What supernatural creature had predicted such a thing? And why alert the police?

In the chateau people were running about. Doors were opening and closing. A butler, not yet in full livery, half-opened the main door and hesitated to come any further. A man appeared behind him, in pyjamas, his hair tousled and his eyes weary.

‘What is it?’ he shouted.

‘The gigolo!’ the doctor murmured cynically into Maigret’s ear.

The cook had been alerted as well. She watched in silence from the basement window. Skylights opened in the roofs leading into the servants’ bedrooms.

‘Well! What are we waiting for? Let’s carry the countess to her bed,’ Maigret thundered indignantly.

It all struck him as sacrilegious, clashing as it did with his childhood memories. It made him uncomfortable, not just emotionally, but physically as well!

... a crime will be committed ...

The second peal of bells rang for mass. People would be in a great hurry. There were farmers who came from far away, on carts. And they had brought flowers to put on the graves in the cemetery.

Jean didn't dare approach. The butler, who had opened the door, was shocked and stood there frozen.

'Your ladyship ... Your lady ...' he stammered.

'So? Are you going to leave her there? Well?'

Why on earth was the doctor wearing an ironic smile on his face?

Maigret took charge of the situation.

'Right! Two men ... You!' (He pointed at the chauffeur.) 'And you!' (He pointed at the butler.) 'Carry her to her bedroom.'

And as they leaned towards the coupé, a bell rang out in the hall.

'The telephone! ... That's strange, at this time of day! ...' Bouchardon muttered.

Jean didn't dare go and answer it. He seemed in a daze. It was Maigret who hurried inside and picked up the receiver.

'Hello! ... Yes, this is the chateau ...'

And a clear voice said, 'Could I speak to my mother? She must have come back from mass ...'

'Who's speaking? ...'

'The Count of Saint-Fiacre ... And in any case that's no concern of yours ... Let me speak to my mother.'

'One moment. Will you tell me where you're calling from?'

'From Moulins! For heaven's sake, I told you ...'

'It would be better for you to come here,' Maigret said, as he hung up.

And he was forced to press his back to the wall to let the two servants pass, carrying the corpse.



2. The Missal

‘Are you coming in?’ the doctor asked as soon as the countess was laid on her bed. ‘I need someone to help me undress her.’

‘We should find a maid!’ Maigret exclaimed.

Jean went upstairs and came back down a short time later with a woman in her thirties, who darted frightened glances.

‘Get out!’ the inspector snapped at the servants, who wanted to do precisely that.

He held Jean back by the sleeve, looked him up and down and led him over to a window.

‘What is the nature of your relations with the countess’s son?’

‘But ... I ...’ The young man was gaunt, and his striped pyjamas, of dubious cleanliness, added nothing to his dignity. His eyes avoided Maigret’s. He kept tugging on his fingers as if to stretch them.

‘Wait!’ the inspector interrupted. ‘Let’s be frank so as not to waste any more time.’

Behind the heavy oak door of the bedroom there was the sound of people coming and going, the squeak of bedsprings, muttered orders being given to the maid by Dr Bouchardon: they were undressing the corpse!

‘What exactly is your situation at the chateau? How long have you been here?’

‘Four years ...’

‘Did you know the Countess of Saint-Fiacre?’

‘I ... That is to say, I was introduced to her by some mutual friends ... My parents had just been ruined by the collapse of a little bank in Lyon ... I came here in a position of trust, to deal with the personal affairs of ...’

‘Excuse me! What did you do before?’

‘I travelled ... I wrote art reviews ...’

Maigret didn’t smile. And in any case the atmosphere wasn’t conducive to irony.

The chateau was huge. From outside it had a certain charm. But the interior looked as seedy as the young man’s pyjamas. Dust everywhere, ugly old objects, a pile of useless junk. The curtains were faded.

And on the walls there were lighter patches, indicating that furniture had been removed.

The best furniture, obviously! The pieces that had some value!

‘You became the countess’s lover ...’

‘Everyone is free to love whoever ...’

‘Idiot!’ muttered Maigret, turning his back on the young man.

As if things weren’t obvious enough already! You only had to look at Jean. You only had to breathe the air of the chateau for a few minutes! And catch the expressions on the servants’ faces!

‘Did you know her son was on his way?’

‘No ... What has that got to do with me?’

And his gaze was still evasive. With his right hand he tugged on the fingers of his left.

‘I’d like to get dressed ... It’s cold ... But why are the police concerned about? ...’

‘Yes, go and get dressed!’

Maigret pushed the door of the bedroom and avoided looking in the direction of the bed, on which the dead woman lay entirely naked.

The bedroom looked like the rest of the house. It was far too big, too cold, filled with mismatched old objects. As he went to lean against the marble mantelpiece, Maigret noticed that it was broken.

‘Have you found anything?’ the inspector asked Bouchardon. ‘Just a moment ... Would you leave us alone, please, mademoiselle?’

And he closed the door behind the maid, pressed his forehead against the window and let his eye wander across the grounds, carpeted with dead leaves and frost.

‘I can only confirm what I told you a moment ago. Death is due to a sudden heart attack.’

‘Caused by? ...’

The doctor gestured vaguely, threw a blanket over the corpse, joined Maigret by the window and lit his pipe.

‘Perhaps a shock ... Perhaps the cold ... Was it cold in the church?’

‘On the contrary! Of course, you’ve found no trace of a wound?’

‘Nothing!’

‘Not the tiniest sign of an injection?’

‘I thought of that. Nothing! And there’s no poison in the countess’s blood. So you understand that it would be hard to claim ...’

Maigret’s face was severe. On the left, under the trees, he could make out the red roof of the estate manager’s house, his birthplace.

‘In just a few words ... life at the chateau?’ he asked under his breath.

‘You know as much as I do. One of those women who are models of good behaviour until the age of forty or forty-five ... That was when the count died, and the son went to Paris to pursue his studies ...’

‘And here?’

‘A series of secretaries came and stayed for various lengths of time ... You saw the latest one ...’

‘The fortune?’

‘The chateau is mortgaged ... Three-quarters of the farms have been sold ... Now and again an antique dealer comes for anything valuable that’s left ...’

‘And what about the son?’

‘I don’t know him well. They say he’s quite a character ...’

‘Thank you!’

Maigret went to leave, but Bouchardon came after him.

‘Between ourselves, I’d be curious as to what coincidence it was that brought you to the church this morning of all mornings ...’

‘Yes! It’s strange ...’

‘I have the feeling I’ve seen you somewhere before ...’

‘It’s possible ...’

And Maigret hurried along the corridor. He was finding it hard to concentrate, because he hadn’t had enough sleep. He might also have caught a cold at Marie Tatin’s inn. He spotted Jean coming down the stairs, wearing a grey suit but still in his slippers. At the same time a car without a silencer drove up in the chateau courtyard.

It was a little racing car, painted canary yellow, long, narrow, uncomfortable-looking. A moment later a man in a leather coat burst into the hall, took off his cap and yelled, ‘Hello! Anyone there? Is everyone still asleep around here?’

But then he noticed Maigret looking at him curiously.

‘What the? ...’

‘Shh! I need to talk to you ...’

Standing beside the inspector, Jean was pale and anxious. As he stepped past him, the Count of Saint-Fiacre punched him lightly on the shoulder and joked, ‘Still here, you rogue?’

He didn’t seem to be angry with him. Just to hold him in complete contempt.

‘At least there’s nothing serious happening, is there?’

‘Your mother died this morning, in church.’

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was thirty, the same age as Jean. They were the same height, but the count was broad, slightly fat. And everything about him, particularly his leather outfit, hinted at a life of frivolity. His clear eyes were cheerful and mocking.

It took those words from Maigret to make him frown.

‘What did you say?’

‘Come in here.’

‘Good heavens! When I’ve ...’

‘When you’ve what?’

‘Nothing. Where is she? ...’

He was stunned, beside himself. In the bedroom, he lifted the blanket just enough to see the dead woman’s face.

No explosion of grief. No tears. No dramatic gestures.

Just three murmured words.

‘Poor old thing!’

Jean had thought it was time for him to walk towards the door, and Maurice noticed and shouted at him, ‘You, get out of here!’

He started getting nervous. He paced back and forth. He bumped into the doctor.

‘What did she die of, Bouchardon?’

‘A heart attack, Monsieur Maurice ... But the inspector might know more than I do on the subject ...’

The young man turned excitedly towards Maigret.

‘Are you from the police? ... What did? ...’

‘Could we talk for a few minutes? I’d like to take a quick stroll down the road. Will you be staying here, doctor?’

‘I was about to go hunting and ...’

‘Well you can go hunting another day!’

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre followed Maigret, staring dreamily at the ground in front of him. When they reached the main avenue of the chateau, seven o’clock mass was coming to an end, and the congregation, larger than the one at first mass, was coming out and assembling in little groups in the square in front of the church. Some people had already gone into the graveyard, and only their heads could be seen over the top of the wall.

As the sun rose, the cold became more intense, probably because of the breeze that swept the dead leaves from one end of the square to the other, making them wheel like birds above the pond of Notre-Dame.

Maigret stuffed his pipe. Wasn’t that the main reason why he had dragged his companion outside? And yet, even in the dead woman’s bedroom the doctor had been smoking. Maigret was used to smoking anywhere at all.

But not at the chateau! It was a special place which, throughout the whole of his youth, had represented everything inaccessible in the world

‘The count called me into his library today, to work with him!’ his father had said with a hint of pride.

And Maigret, a little boy in those days, watched respectfully the pram being pushed by a nanny in the park. The baby was Maurice de Saint-Fiacre.

‘Would anyone stand to benefit from your mother’s death?’

‘I don’t understand ... The doctor just said ...’

He was anxious and twitchy. He snatched the piece of paper that Maigret held out to him, the one that announced the crime.

‘What does this mean? Bouchardon is talking about a heart attack and ...’

‘A heart attack that someone predicted a few days ago!’

A few villagers watched them from a distance. The two men approached the church, walking slowly, following their own trains of thought.

‘What did you plan to do at the chateau this morning?’

‘I’m wondering that very thing myself,’ the young man said carefully. ‘You asked me a moment ago whether ... Well, then, yes! There is someone who stands to gain from my mother’s death ... I do!’

He wasn’t joking. He looked concerned. A man passed on a bicycle, and he greeted him by name.

‘Since you’re from the police, you must have worked out the situation already ... Besides, that animal Bouchardon will have had no compunction about spilling the beans. My mother was a poor old woman. My father is dead. I’ve gone away. Left all on her own, I think she went slightly deranged. At first she spent her time at church ... Then ...’

‘The young secretaries!’

‘I don’t think it was what you believe, and what Bouchardon was trying to insinuate. Nothing untoward! Just a need for affection. The need to look after someone ... which these young men took advantage of to take things further ... There you are! That didn’t mean she wasn’t devout. She must have had terrible crises of conscience, torn as she was between her faith and this ... this ...’

‘You were saying you stood to gain? ...’

‘You’re aware that there isn’t much left of our fortune ... And people like the chap you saw a moment ago have high ambitions ... Let’s say that in three or four years there would have been nothing left at all ...’

He was bare-headed. He ran his fingers through his hair. Then, looking Maigret straight in the eye and pausing for a moment, he added:

‘It remains for me to tell you that I came here today to ask my mother for forty thousand francs ... And I need those forty thousand francs to cover a cheque that will otherwise bounce ... You see how everything links together!’

As they passed a hedge he pulled a twig from it. He seemed to be struggling not to let events get on top of him.

‘And to think I brought Marie Vassiliev with me!’

‘Marie Vassiliev?’

‘My girlfriend! I left her in her bed, in Moulins ... She’s quite capable of hiring a car right now and running off. That’s all I need!’

They were only now turning out the lights in Marie Tatin’s, where some men were drinking rum. The Moulins bus was about to set off, half empty.

‘She didn’t deserve that!’ Maurice said dreamily.

‘Who?’

‘My mother!’

And at that moment there was something childlike about him, in spite of his height and his developing paunch. Perhaps he was finally on the brink of crying?

The two men were walking up and down near the church, forever pacing out the same path, now facing the pond, now turning their backs on it.

‘Look, inspector! It isn’t at all possible that someone might have killed her ... or at least I can’t imagine ...’

Maigret thought about it, so intensely that he forgot all about his companion. He was remembering the tiniest details of the first mass.

The countess in her pew ... No one had gone near her ... She had taken communion ... She had knelt down with her face in her hands ... Then she had opened her missal ... A little later, she had her face in her hands again ...

‘Would you excuse me for a moment?’

Maigret climbed the steps and entered the church, where the sacristan was already preparing the altar for high mass. The bell-ringer, a clumsy peasant in heavy hobnail boots, was straightening the chairs.

The inspector walked straight towards the pews, bent down and called the sexton, who turned round.

‘Who picked up the missal?’

‘Which missal?’

‘The countess’s ... It was left here.’

‘Is that right?’

‘You, come here!’ Maigret said to the bell-ringer. ‘Have you seen the missal that was here earlier?’

‘What?’

Either he was stupid or he was pretending to be. Maigret was agitated. He noticed Maurice de Saint-Fiacre standing at the end of the nave.

‘Who has been near this pew?’

‘The doctor’s wife was sitting there at seven o’clock mass ...’

‘I didn’t think the doctor was a religious man.’

‘Perhaps he isn’t – but his wife ...’

‘Right! Tell the whole village that there’s a big reward for anyone who brings me the missal.’

‘To the chateau?’

‘No! To Marie Tatin’s.’

Outside, Maurice de Saint-Fiacre walked beside him again.

‘I don’t understand this matter about the missal.’

‘Heart attack, isn’t that right? ... Maybe caused by some kind of shock ... And it happened shortly after communion, in other words after the countess had opened her missal ... Let’s imagine that in that missal ...’

But the young man shook his head.

‘I can’t imagine any sort of message that might have given my mother such a shock ... Besides, it would be so ... so hateful ...’

He was having difficulty breathing. He looked grimly at the chateau.

‘Let’s go and get a drink!’

He headed not towards the chateau, but towards the inn, where his entry caused some awkwardness. The four farmers drinking were suddenly ill at ease. They greeted him with a mixture of respect and fear.

Marie Tatin ran from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. She stammered:

‘Monsieur Maurice ... I’m so distraught at the news ... Our poor countess ...’

She was crying. She probably cried her heart out every time someone died in the village.

‘You were at mass too, weren’t you?’ she said, calling Maigret as her witness. ‘To think that nobody noticed anything. I was here when they came and told me ...’

It is always embarrassing, in such cases, to show less grief than people who are uninvolved. Maurice tried to hide his impatience as he listened to these

words of condolence and to grant himself some composure he fetched a bottle of rum from the shelf and filled two glasses.

A shiver ran down his back as he drained his glass in one, and he said to Maigret, 'I think I caught a cold on my way here this morning.'

'Everyone around here has a cold, Monsieur Maurice.'

And, to Maigret: 'You should take care too. I heard you coughing last night ...'

The villagers left. The fire was blazing.

'A day like today!' said Marie Tatin.

And it was impossible to tell whether she was looking at Maigret or at the count, because her eyes went in different directions.

'Wouldn't you like a bite to eat? But look at me! I was so flabbergasted when I was told ... that it didn't even occur to me to change my dress ...'

She had just put an apron on over the black dress that she only ever wore to go to mass. Her hat was on the table.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre drank a second glass of rum, and looked at Maigret as if asking him what to do.

'Let's go!' said the inspector.

'Will you have lunch here? I've killed a chicken and ...'

But the two men were already outside. In front of the church there were four or five carts, their horses tethered to trees. Heads could be seen coming and going above the low wall of the cemetery. And, in the courtyard of the chateau, the only touch of vivid colour was the yellow car.

'The cheque was crossed?' Maigret asked.

'Yes! But it will be deposited tomorrow.'

'Do you do a lot of work?'

Silence. The sound of their footsteps on the paved road. The rustle of dead leaves carried by the wind. The horses snorting.

'I am the very definition of a good-for-nothing! I've done a bit of everything. You see! The forty thousand ... I was going to set up a film club. Before that I ran a wireless business ...'

A faint sound of gunshot, on their right, beyond the Notre-Dame pond. They saw a huntsman striding towards the bird he had killed, towards which his dog was hurrying.

‘It’s Gautier, the estate manager,’ said Maurice. ‘He must have gone hunting ...’

Then all of a sudden he had a fit of annoyance, stamped his heel on the ground, pulled a face and nearly sobbed.

‘Poor old thing!’ he muttered, his lips pursed. ‘It’s ... it’s so wretched! ... and that little swine Jean who ...’

As if by magic, they saw Jean pacing the courtyard of the chateau, side by side with the doctor, who must have been engaged in a heated discussion with him, since he was waving his thin arms around.

They occasionally caught the smell of chrysanthemums in the wind.



3. The Altar Boy

There was no sun to distort the images, and no greyness either to blur the outlines of things. Everything stood out with sharp clarity: the trunks of the trees, the dead branches, the pebbles and especially the black clothes of the people who had come to the cemetery. The whites, on the other hand, gravestones or starched shirt-fronts, or the bonnets of the old women, looked unreal and perfidious: whites too shockingly white.

Had it not been for the crisp breeze cutting into people's cheeks, it was almost as if they were under a slightly dusty bell-jar.

'I'll see you in a minute!'

Maigret left the Count of Saint-Fiacre outside the cemetery gate. An old woman, sitting on a little bench that she had brought with her, was trying to sell oranges and chocolate.

Oranges! Fat ones! Unripe! And candied ... They put your teeth on edge, they rasped your throat but, when he was ten years old, Maigret had devoured them anyway, because they were oranges.

He had turned up the velvet collar of his overcoat. He didn't look at anyone. He knew that he had to turn to the left, and that the grave he was looking for was the third one past the cypress tree.

All around, the cemetery was covered with flowers. The previous day, some women had washed certain gravestones with a brush and soap. The gates had been repainted.

HERE LIES ÉVARISTE MAIGRET ...

‘Excuse me! No smoking.’

The inspector barely noticed that anyone was talking to him. At last he stared at the bell-ringer, who was also the grave-digger, and put his pipe, still lit, in his pocket.

He couldn’t think about one thing at a time. Memories came flooding in, memories of his father, a friend who had drowned in the Notre-Dame pond, the child of the chateau in his beautiful pram ...

People looked at him. He looked at them. He had seen these faces before. But back then, that man holding a little boy in his arms, for example, the one walking behind a pregnant woman, had been a little boy of four or five.

Maigret had no flowers. The tombstone was blackened. He came out grumpily and muttered to himself, making a whole group of people turn round: ‘We really need to find the missal!’

He didn’t want to go back to the chateau. There was something about it that disgusted, even infuriated him.

Certainly, he was under no illusion about the men. But he was furious with them for sullyng his childhood memories! Especially the countess, whom he had always considered as noble and lovely as a character in a picture-book ...

And there she was, a batty old lady who kept gigolos!

Not even that! There was nothing honest or open about it! The famous Jean was just playing at being a secretary! He wasn’t handsome, he wasn’t even all that young!

And the poor old woman, as her son had said, was tormented, torn between the chateau and the church.

And the latest Count of Saint-Fiacre risked arrest for presenting a dud cheque!

Someone was walking in front of Maigret with his gun over his shoulder, and the inspector suddenly noticed that he was heading towards the estate manager’s house. He thought he recognized the silhouette he had seen in the field from a distance.

A few metres separated the two men, who were about to enter the courtyard where a few hens were huddled against a wall, in the shelter of the wind, their feathers trembling.

‘Hey! ...’

The man with the rifle turned round.

‘Are you the Saint-Fiacre estate manager?’

‘And you are?’

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire.’

‘Maigret?’

The estate manager was struck by the name, but couldn’t remember exactly why.

‘Have you been told what’s going on?’

‘I’ve just been informed ... I was hunting ... But what do the police? ...’

He was a small, squat man, grey-haired, his skin criss-crossed with fine, deep wrinkles, and pupils that looked as if they were lying in ambush behind thick eyebrows.

‘I was told her heart ...’

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m hardly going to go into the chateau with my boots covered in mud and my rifle ...’

The head of a rabbit hung from his game-bag. Maigret looked at the house they were walking towards.

‘Wait a moment! They’ve changed the kitchen ...’

He felt a suspicious glance upon him.

‘Fifteen years ago!’ murmured the estate manager.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Gautier ... Is it true that the count arrived without ...’

His whole attitude was hesitant, reticent. And Gautier didn’t even invite Maigret inside. He pushed open his door.

The inspector came in anyway and turned right, towards the dining room, which smelled of biscuits and brandy.

‘If you have a moment, Monsieur Gautier ... You’re not needed at the house ... But I have a few questions to ask you ...’

‘Hurry up!’ said a woman’s voice in the kitchen. ‘Apparently it’s horrible ...’

And Maigret ran his fingers along the oak table, its corners decorated with carved lions. It was the one from his childhood! It had been sold on to the new estate manager after his father’s death.

‘Can I offer you something?’

Gautier chose a bottle from the sideboard, perhaps as a way of gaining some time.

‘What do you think about Monsieur Jean? ... And by the way, what’s his surname? ...’

‘Métayer ... A respectable family from Bourges ...’

‘Did he cost the countess a lot of money?’

Gautier filled the glasses with brandy, but remained stubbornly silent.

‘What business did he have at the chateau? As estate manager I assume you look after everything ...’

‘Everything!’

‘So?’

‘He didn’t do anything ... A few private letters ... At first he claimed to be making the countess some money, thanks to his knowledge of finance ... He bought some shares that collapsed in a few months ... But he insisted that he would make it all back and more thanks to a new photographic process that one of his friends had invented ... It cost the countess about a hundred thousand francs, and the friend disappeared ... And last of all there was some story about photographic printing ... I don’t know a thing about it. Something like photoengraving or heliogravure, but cheaper ...’

‘Jean Métayer was a busy man!’

‘A lot of effort for not much result ... He wrote articles in the *Journal de Moulins*, and they had to take them because of the countess ... That was where he did his printing experiments, and the editor didn’t dare throw him out ... Cheers! ...’

And, suddenly uneasy:

‘There were no rows between him and the count.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘I assume you’re just here by chance ... Since it was a heart attack, there’s no reason to ...’

What annoyed Maigret most was that he couldn’t catch the estate manager’s eye. He wiped his moustache and moved into the other room.

‘Do you mind if I get changed? ... I was supposed to be going to high mass and now ...’

‘I’ll see you later!’ said Maigret as he left.

And he was just closing the door when he heard the still invisible woman asking, 'Who was that?'

They had put sandstone paving stones down in the courtyard, where he had once played marbles on the beaten earth.

The square was filled with groups of people in their Sunday best, and the sound of organ music filtered from the church. The children, in their new suits, didn't dare to play. And handkerchiefs protruded from everyone's pockets. They all had red noses, which they blew noisily.

Scraps of phrases reached Maigret's ears:

'He's a policeman from Paris ...'

'... Apparently he's come about the cow that died at Mathieu's the other week ...'

A cocky young man with a red flower in the buttonhole of his navy-blue serge waistcoat, his face well scrubbed and his hair shiny with brilliantine, dared to call out to the inspector:

'They're waiting for you at Tatin's, it's about that guy who stole ...'

And he nudged his friends in the ribs, holding in a laugh that exploded in any case as soon as Maigret turned his head away.

He hadn't been making it up. At Marie Tatin's the atmosphere was hotter now, and thick with pipe smoke. At one table a family of villagers were eating food they had brought from the farm and drinking big bowls of coffee. The father was cutting a dried sausage with his penknife.

The young people were drinking lemonade, the old ones brandy. And Marie Tatin trotted ceaselessly about.

In one corner a woman got up as the inspector came in and took a step towards him, fearful and hesitant, her lips moist. Her hand rested on the shoulder of a little boy; Maigret recognized his red hair.

'Are you the inspector, sir?'

Everyone looked in his direction.

'First of all I want to tell you, sir, that we've always been honest people in our family! But we're poor ... You understand? ... And when I saw that Ernest ...'

The boy, extremely pale, stared straight ahead without showing the slightest emotion.

‘Are you the one who took the missal?’ Maigret asked him, bending towards him.

No answer. A keen, shy glance.

‘Answer the inspector ...’

But the little boy didn’t open his mouth. His mother swiftly gave him a slap that left a red mark on his left cheek. The boy’s head rocked for a moment. His eyes moistened slightly, his lips trembled, but he didn’t move.

‘Are you going to give him an answer, you little wretch?’

And to Maigret:

‘Children today! For months he’s been pleading with me to buy him a missal! A big one like the one the priest has! Can you imagine that? ... So, when I was told about the countess’s missal, I immediately thought ... And besides! I’d been surprised to see him coming back between second and third mass, because he usually eats at the presbytery ... I went into his room and found it under the mattress ...’

Again the mother’s hand struck the child’s cheek. He did nothing to defend himself.

‘I couldn’t even read at his age! But I was never bad enough to steal a book ...’

There was a respectful silence in the inn. Maigret held the missal in his hands.

‘Thank you.’

He was in a hurry to examine it. He walked to the back of the room.

‘Inspector, sir ...’

The woman was calling to him. She was puzzled.

‘I was told there was a reward ... Not because Ernest ...’

Maigret held out twenty francs, which she put carefully in her purse, before dragging her son towards the door, saying crossly, ‘As for you, you young delinquent, just you wait till I get you home ...’

Maigret’s eye met the boy’s. The glance lasted a matter of seconds. But they both knew that they were friends.

Perhaps because Maigret himself had once wanted – without ever owning one! – a gilt-edged missal, containing not only the ordinary of the mass but all the liturgical texts in two columns, in Latin and French.

‘What time will you be back for lunch?’

‘I don’t know.’

Maigret was about to go to his room to examine the missal, but when he remembered the draughts from the roof he chose instead to take the main road.

It was as he walked slowly towards the chateau that he opened the bound book with the Saint-Fiacre coat of arms. Or rather he didn’t open it. The missal opened all by itself, at a page where a piece of paper had been slipped between two pages.

Page 221: ‘Prayer after communion.’

The piece of paper was a roughly cut scrap of newspaper which, at first glance, looked odd, as if it had been badly printed.

Paris, 1 November. A dramatic suicide occurred this morning in a flat on Rue de Miromesnil occupied for several years by the Count of Saint-Fiacre and his Russian girlfriend, a certain Marie V ...

After informing his girlfriend that he was ashamed of the scandal provoked by a member of the family, the count fired a bullet into his head from a Browning and died a few minutes later without regaining consciousness.

We have reason to believe that this was a particularly painful family drama, and that the person in question is none other than the mother of the unfortunate man.

A goose that had wandered into the path furiously stretched its gaping beak towards Maigret. Bells rang, and the crowd shuffled slowly out of the little church accompanied by the smells of incense and snuffed candles.

Maigret had shoved the missal into his pocket, making it bulge, and had stopped to examine the terrible piece of paper.

The crime weapon! A newspaper cutting, seven centimetres by five!

The Countess of Saint-Fiacre went to first mass, knelt down in the pew reserved for the members of her family for two centuries.

She took communion. It was planned. She opened her missal to read the ‘prayer after communion’.

There was the weapon! And Maigret turned the bit of paper in all directions. He found something not quite right about it. He looked among other things at the alignment of the letters, and was convinced that it had not been produced by a rotary press as a real newspaper would have been.

It was a simple galley, hand-printed. And in fact the sheet bore exactly the same text on the other side.

The murderer hadn't taken the trouble to refine it, or perhaps he hadn't had time. Would it have occurred to the countess to turn the page over? Would she not have died first, from shock, indignation, shame or anguish?

There was a frightening expression on Maigret's face: because he had never before seen a crime at once so cowardly and so skilful.

And whoever had committed the crime had also called the police!

Assuming that the missal wouldn't have been found ...

Yes! That was it! No one was supposed to find the missal! In which case it would have been impossible to speak of a crime, to accuse anyone at all! The countess had died of a sudden heart attack!

He suddenly turned on his heel. He reached Marie Tatin's while everyone was talking about him and the missal.

'Do you know where little Ernest lives?'

'Three houses past the grocer's, on the main street ...'

He ran off in that direction. A single-storey cottage. Enlarged photographs of the father and mother hung on either side of the dresser. The woman, already in her house clothes, was in the kitchen, which smelled of roast beef.

'Is your son here?'

'He's changing. There's no point in him dirtying his Sunday clothes ... You saw how I shook him! ... And to think that he's only ever had good examples in front of his eyes and who ...'

She opened a door and shouted, 'Come here, you scoundrel!'

And the boy could be seen in his underpants, trying to hide himself.

'Let him get dressed,' said Maigret. 'I'll talk to him later ...'

The woman went on preparing lunch. Her husband was probably at Marie Tatin's, having an early drink.

At last the door opened, and Ernest came shiftily in, wearing his weekday suit, the trousers of which were too long.

'Come for a walk with me ...'

'Really?' the woman exclaimed. 'In that case, Ernest ... Hurry up and put on your good suit ...'

'There's no need! ... Come on then, my little man ...'

The street was deserted. The life of the village was concentrated on the square, the cemetery and Marie Tatin's.

‘Tomorrow I’ll give you an even bigger missal, with the first letters of each verse in red ...’

The little boy was amazed. So the inspector knew that there was such a thing as missals with red letters, like the one on the altar?

‘Only, you’re going to tell me quite honestly where you got this one! I’m not going to tell you off ...’

It was odd to see the old peasant suspicion appearing on the boy’s face. His mouth was shut. He was already on the defensive.

‘Did you find it on the prie-dieu?’

Silence! His cheeks and the top of his nose were scattered with freckles. His fleshy lips were tight as he tried not to show any emotion.

‘Don’t you realize that I’m your great friend?’

‘Yes ... You gave my mum twenty francs.’

‘So?’

The boy savoured his revenge.

‘On the way back my mum said she’d only slapped me for show, and gave me fifty centimes.’

Bull’s-eye! The boy knew his stuff! What thoughts was he rolling about in that head, too big for his thin body?

‘And the sacristan?’

‘He didn’t say anything to me ...’

‘Who took the missal from the prie-dieu?’

‘I don’t know ...’

‘And where did you find it?’

‘Under my surplice, in the sacristy ... I was supposed to go and eat in the presbytery. I’d forgotten my handkerchief ... When I moved my surplice I felt something hard ...’

‘Was the sacristan there too?’

‘He was in church, putting the candles out ... You know the ones with the red letters are very expensive ...’

So someone had taken the missal from the prie-dieu and hidden it momentarily in the sacristy, under the altar boy’s surplice, with the clear intention of coming to get it later!

‘Did you open it?’

‘I didn’t have time ... I wanted my boiled egg ... Because on Sunday ...’

‘I know.’

And Ernest wondered how this man from the city could know that there was an egg and bread and jam at the priest’s house on Sunday.

‘You can go.’

‘Is it true that I’ll have ...?’

‘A missal, yes ... Tomorrow ... Goodbye, son.’

Maigret held out his hand, and the boy hesitated for a moment before holding out his own.

‘I know it’s just a joke!’ he said none the less as he walked away.

A crime in three stages, then: someone had set the article, or had it set, using a linotype machine, the kind that you only find in a newspaper office or a very big printworks.

Someone had slipped the piece of paper into the missal, carefully choosing the page.

And someone had taken the missal back, had hidden it momentarily under the surplice, in the sacristy.

Had the same man done everything? Had each action been performed by a different person? Had two of the actions been performed by the same person?

As he was passing in front of the church, Maigret saw the priest coming out and heading towards him. He waited for him under the poplar trees, beside the woman selling oranges and chocolate.

‘I’m going to the chateau ...’ he said as he joined the inspector. ‘It’s the first time I’ve celebrated mass without even knowing what I’m doing ... The idea that a crime ...’

‘It really was a crime,’ Maigret murmured.

They walked in silence. Without a word, the inspector held out the piece of paper to his companion, who read it and gave it back.

And they walked another hundred yards without uttering a word.

‘Chaos creates chaos ... But she was an unhappy creature ...’

They both had to hold on to their hats as the wind grew stronger.

‘I didn’t have the energy ...’ the priest added in a grim voice.

‘You?’

‘She came to see me every day ... She was ready to return to the ways of the Lord ... But every day, in there ...’

There was a hint of harshness in his voice.

‘I didn’t want to go there! And yet it was my duty ...’

They nearly stopped, because two men were walking along the big avenue of the chateau and they were about to meet them. They recognized the doctor, with his brown beard and, beside him, Jean Métayer, who was talking feverishly to him. The yellow car was in the courtyard. They guessed that Métayer didn’t dare go back to the chateau while the Count of Saint-Fiacre was there.

The village was wrapped in an ambiguous light. An ambiguous situation! With all those dark comings and goings!

‘Come on!’ said Maigret.

And the doctor must have said the same thing to Métayer, then dragged him along until the moment when he could say, ‘Hello, Father! You know, I can reassure you at last ... It’s true that I’m a non-believer, but I can guess your horror at the idea that a crime might have been committed in your church ... Well, it hasn’t! ... Science is clear on the matter ... *Our* countess died of a heart attack ...’

Maigret had walked over to Jean Métayer.

‘One question ...’

He was aware of the tension in the young man, who was panting with anxiety.

‘When was the last time that you went to the *Journal de Moulins*?’

‘I ... wait ...’

He was about to speak, but his unease made him cautious. He darted a suspicious glance at the inspector.

‘Why are you asking me that?’

‘Doesn’t matter!’

‘Am I obliged to answer?’

‘You are free to remain silent!’

Not the face of a degenerate, perhaps, but a face that was worried, tormented. Nervousness far beyond the average, capable of interesting Dr Bouchardon, who was talking to the priest.

‘I know I’ll be the one tormented! ... But I will defend myself ...’

‘Of course! You will defend yourself!’

‘First I want to see a lawyer. It’s my right ... And besides, what right do you have? ...’

‘Just a moment. Have you studied law?’

‘For two years.’

He tried to regain his composure and smile.

‘No charges have been brought, nobody’s been caught in flagrante ... So you have no right to ...’

‘Very good! Ten out of ten!’

‘The doctor maintains that ...’

‘And I claim that the countess was killed by the most revolting sort of swine. Read this!’

And Maigret held out the piece of printed paper. Suddenly quite stiff, Jean Métayer looked at his companion as if he was going to spit in his face.

‘By the ... What did you say? ... I can’t allow you to ...’

And the inspector, gently resting his hand on his shoulder, said:

‘But my dear boy, I haven’t said anything to *you* at all! Where’s the count? Go on reading. You can give me the paper later on ...’

A flame of triumph flared in Métayer’s eyes.

‘The count is talking cheques with the estate manager! ... You’ll find them in the library! ...’

The priest and the doctor walked ahead, and Maigret heard the doctor’s voice saying, ‘No, Father! It’s human! It’s more than human! If only you had studied a little physiology rather than poring over the writings of Saint Augustine ...’

And the gravel crunched under the feet of the four men who slowly climbed the steps, turned even harder and whiter by the cold.



4. Marie Vassiliev

Maigret couldn't be everywhere at once. The chateau was huge. That was why he could only have the most approximate idea of the morning's events.

It was the time of day when, on Sundays and holidays, country folk delay going home, savouring the pleasure of being in a group, in their best clothes, in the village square or at the café. Some of them were already drunk. Others were talking too loudly. And the children in their stiff clothes looked admiringly at their fathers.

At the Château de Saint-Fiacre, Jean Métayer, looking sallow in the face, had gone all alone to the first floor, where he could be heard pacing back and forth in one of the rooms.

'If you'd like to come with me ...' the doctor said to the priest.

And he led him towards the countess's bedroom.

On the ground floor, a wide corridor ran the length of the building, pierced by a row of doors. Maigret could hear the hum of voices. He had been told that the Count of Saint-Fiacre and the estate manager were in the library.

He tried to go in, got the wrong door and found himself in the drawing room. The communicating door with the library was open. In a gilt-framed mirror he caught the image of a young man sitting on a corner of the desk, looking overwhelmed, and the estate manager, standing foursquare on his short legs.

'You should have worked out that there was no point in pushing the matter!' Gautier was saying. 'Especially when forty thousand francs were involved!'

'Who answered my phone call?'

'Monsieur Jean, of course!'

‘And he didn’t pass the message on to my mother!’

Maigret coughed and stepped into the library.

‘Which phone call are you talking about?’

And Maurice de Saint-Fiacre replied, unabashed, ‘My call to the chateau the day before yesterday. As I’ve already told you, I needed money. I wanted to ask my mother for the necessary sum, but that ... that ... well, that Monsieur Jean, as they call him here, was the one I got through to ...’

‘And he told you there was nothing to be done? And you came anyway ...’

The estate manager observed the two men. Maurice had stepped away from the desk he was perched on.

‘I didn’t take Gautier aside to talk about this, by the way!’ he said agitatedly. ‘I didn’t hide the situation from you, inspector. Tomorrow, a complaint will be lodged against me. Obviously, with my mother dead, I’m the sole natural heir. So I asked Gautier to find the forty thousand francs for tomorrow morning ... And well! Apparently it’s impossible.’

‘Completely impossible!’ repeated the estate manager.

‘Naturally we can’t do anything before the notary gets involved, and he won’t bring the interested parties together until after the funeral. And Gautier adds that even without that it would be hard to find forty thousand francs to borrow on what’s left of the estate ...’

He had started pacing back and forth.

‘It’s obvious, isn’t it? It’s staring us in the face! And there’s even a chance that they won’t let me walk at the head of the cortège ... But incidentally ... One more question ... You mentioned a crime ... Is it possible that? ...’

‘No complaint has been brought, and probably none will be,’ said Maigret. ‘So the courts will not be involved in the affair ...’

‘Leave us on our own, Gautier!’

And as soon as the estate manager had left, he said sadly, ‘A crime, really?’

‘A crime that doesn’t officially concern the police!’

‘Explain yourself ... I’m beginning to ...’

But a woman’s voice was heard in the hall, accompanied by the more serious voice of the estate manager. Maurice frowned and walked towards the door, opening it abruptly.

‘Marie? What are? ...’

‘Maurice! Why won’t they let me in? ... It’s intolerable! I’ve been waiting at the hotel for an hour ...’

She spoke with a very marked foreign accent. This was Marie Vassiliev, who had arrived from Moulins in an old taxi that could be seen in the courtyard.

She was tall and very beautiful, with blonde hair, probably dyed. Seeing that Maigret was looking at her carefully, she started talking rapidly in English, and Maurice replied in the same language.

She asked him if he had any money. He replied that it was out of the question, that his mother was dead, that she had to go back to Paris, where he would join her soon.

Then she laughed sarcastically:

‘With what? I don’t even have enough money to pay for the taxi!’

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre started to lose his composure. His mistress’s shrill voice echoed around the chateau, lending a note of scandal to the scene.

The estate manager was still in the corridor.

‘If you stay here, I’ll stay with you!’ announced Marie Vassiliev.

And Maigret said to Gautier: ‘Send the car away and pay the driver.’

The chaos mounted. Not material, repairable chaos, but a moral chaos that seemed to be contagious. Gautier himself was losing his footing.

‘And yet we need to talk, inspector,’ the young man said.

‘Not now!’

And he pointed at the aggressively elegant woman who was pacing up and down in the library and the drawing room as if drawing up an inventory.

‘Who is this stupid portrait of, Maurice?’ she exclaimed with a laugh.

Footsteps on the stairs. Maigret saw Jean Métayer walking past, now wearing a big overcoat and carrying a suitcase. Métayer must have suspected that he wouldn’t be allowed to leave, because he stopped by the library door and waited.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To the inn! I think it would be more dignified of me to ...’

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, to get rid of his mistress, led her towards a bedroom in the right wing of the chateau. They went on talking in English.

‘Is it true that forty thousand francs couldn’t be borrowed on the chateau?’ Maigret asked the estate manager.

‘It would be difficult.’

‘Well do the impossible, by tomorrow morning!’

The inspector hesitated to leave. At the last minute he decided to go to the first floor, where a surprise awaited him. While downstairs everyone seemed to be milling around aimlessly, upstairs someone had made the Countess of Saint-Fiacre’s bedroom neat and tidy.

The doctor, with the assistance of the maid, had washed the corpse.

The atmosphere was no longer sordid and ambiguous, as it had been that morning! And the body wasn’t the same either.

The dead woman, wearing a white nightdress, lay on her four-poster bed in a peaceful and dignified pose, with her hands folded over a crucifix.

Everything was already in place: lit candles, holy water and a sprig of olive-wood in a cup.

Bouchardon looked at Maigret as he came in and seemed to be saying: ‘Well! What do you think? Isn’t this a good piece of work?’

The priest prayed, soundlessly moving his lips. He remained alone with the dead woman while the other two left.

In the square in front of the church the groups had thinned out. Through the curtains of the houses, families could be seen sitting down at the table for lunch.

For a few seconds, the sun tried to pierce the clouds, but then a moment later the sky turned dreary again, and the rustling of the trees grew louder.

Sitting in the corner by the window, Jean Métayer was eating mechanically as he gazed out on the empty road. Maigret was sitting at the far end of the dining room of the inn. Between them was a family from a nearby village that had arrived in a van, bringing groceries from home, and Marie Tatin was serving them drinks.

Poor Marie Tatin was in a state. She no longer had any idea what was going on. Usually she only let out an attic room from time to time, to a workman who had come to do some repairs at the chateau or one of the farms.

And here she had not only Maigret, but another lodger too: the countess’s secretary.

She didn’t dare to ask any questions. All morning she had heard her customers saying terrible things. She had heard them talking, among other things, about the police!

‘I’m worried that the chicken may be overcooked ...’ she said as she served Maigret.

And her tone was the one in which she might have said, for example: ‘I’m afraid of everything! I don’t know what’s going on. Holy Virgin, protect me!’

The inspector looked at her affectionately. She had always looked as fearful and sickly as she did now.

‘Marie, do you remember ...’

Her eyes widened. She was already making a defensive movement.

‘... the thing that happened with the frogs?’

‘But ... who ...’

‘Your mother had sent you to pick mushrooms in the field behind the Notre-Dame pond ... Three boys were playing there ... They took advantage of a moment when you were thinking about something else to swap the mushrooms in your basket for frogs ... And all the way home you were worried because the things were croaking ...’

She had been studying him attentively for a few moments, and at last she stammered: ‘Maigret?’

‘Look! Monsieur Jean has finished his chicken and is ready for his next course.’

And all of a sudden Marie Tatin seemed completely transformed: she was more troubled than before, but also, increasingly, more trusting.

How odd life was! Years and years without the slightest incident, with nothing to break the monotony of the days. And then, all of a sudden, incomprehensible events, dramas, things you don’t even read in the newspapers!

As she served Jean Métayer and the villagers, she sometimes gave Maigret a look of complicity. When he had finished, she asked shyly:

‘Will you take a little glass of brandy, sir?’

‘You used to call me by my first name, Marie!’

She laughed. No, she didn’t dare!

‘But you haven’t had lunch yourself!’

‘No, I have! I always eat in the kitchen, without stopping. A mouthful now ... A mouthful later ...’

A motorbike passed along the road. They could just make out a more elegant young man than most of the inhabitants of Saint-Fiacre.

‘Who was that?’

‘Didn’t you see him this morning? Émile Gautier, the estate manager’s son.’

‘Where’s he going?’

‘Probably Moulins! He’s practically a city-dweller. He works in a bank.’

People could be seen coming out of their houses, walking along the road or heading towards the cemetery.

Strangely, Maigret was sleepy. He felt exhausted, as if he had been over-exerting himself. And it wasn’t because he had got up at half past five in the morning, or because he had caught a cold.

It was the atmosphere that was oppressing him. He felt personally affected by events, and filled with disgust.

Yes, disgust! That was the word! He had never imagined that he would find his village in this state. Even his father’s grave, the stone quite blackened, where he had been told he couldn’t smoke!

Opposite him, Jean Métayer emanated self-confidence. He knew he was being watched. As he ate, he forced himself to remain calm and even affected a vaguely contemptuous smile.

‘A little glass?’ Marie Tatin suggested to him as well.

‘No, thank you! I never drink alcohol ...’

He was polite. He liked to display good manners on all occasions. At the inn he ate with the same precious gestures as he would have done at the chateau.

Once his meal was finished, he asked: ‘Do you have a telephone?’

‘No, but there’s one opposite, in the kiosk ...’

He crossed the road and went into the grocery shop run by the sacristan, where the kiosk was situated. He must have been asking for a long-distance call, because he was seen waiting in the shop for a long time, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

When he came back, the villagers had left the inn. Marie Tatin washed the glasses in anticipation of Vespers, which would bring in new customers.

‘Who were you calling? Remember that I can find out by going to the telephone ...’

‘My father, in Bourges.’

His voice was brusque, aggressive.

‘I asked him to send me a lawyer straight away.’

He was like one of those yappy little dogs who show their teeth even before you go to touch them.

‘Are you so sure that they’re going to bother you?’

‘I will ask you not to speak to me before my lawyer arrives. Believe me, I’m sorry there’s only one inn around here.’

Did he hear the words that the inspector muttered as he left?

‘Idiot! ... Stupid little idiot ...’

And Marie Tatin, although she didn’t know why, was afraid to be left on her own with him.

The whole day would be marked by chaos, by indecision, probably because no one felt qualified to take control of events.

Maigret, wrapped up in his heavy overcoat, was wandering about the village. He was seen now in the church square, now around the chateau, whose windows were lighting up one by one.

For night was falling quickly. The church was illuminated and echoed with the sound of organ music. The bell-ringer closed the cemetery gate.

And groups of people, barely visible in the darkness, had gathered to ask each other whether they should visit the bedside of the deceased. Two men set off first, and were received by the butler, who didn’t know what was supposed to happen either. No tray had been prepared for visiting cards. They tried to find Maurice de Saint-Fiacre to ask his advice, and the Russian girl replied that he had gone for a walk.

She was lying down, fully clothed, smoking cigarettes with a cardboard filter.

Then the maid ushered the people in with a shrug of indifference.

That was the signal. There were hurried confabs at the end of Vespers.

‘No, they are! Old Martin and young Bonnet have been already!’

Everyone went, in procession. The chateau was dimly lit. The villagers walked along the corridor, and silhouettes stood out at each window in turn. They held their children by the hand, shaking them to stop them making any noise.

The stairs. The first-floor corridor. And at last the bedroom, which the people entered for the first time.

The only person there was the countess's maid, who witnessed the invasion with horror. People crossed themselves with a spring of boxwood dipped in holy water. The more audacious of them murmured beneath their breath: 'She looks as if she's sleeping!'

And others, in an echo:

'She didn't suffer ...'

Then footsteps rang out on the uneven parquet floor. The stairs creaked. People were heard saying:

'Shh! ... Hold on tightly to the banister ...'

The cook, in her kitchen in the basement, saw only the legs of the people passing.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre came back just as the house was being invaded. He looked wide-eyed at the villagers. The visitors wondered whether they were supposed to talk to him or not. But he just nodded to them and went into Marie Vassiliev's room, where they heard English being spoken.

Maigret was in the church. The sacristan, snuffer in hand, was walking from candle to candle. The priest was taking off his sacerdotal garments in the sacristy.

On each side, the confessionals with their little green curtains designed to shield the penitents from view. Maigret remembered when his face didn't come up high enough to be hidden by the curtain.

Behind him the bell-ringer, who hadn't seen him, was closing the main door and drawing the bolts.

Then all of a sudden the inspector crossed the nave and stepped into the sacristy, where the priest was startled to see him appear.

'I'm sorry, Father! Before I do anything else I'd like to ask you a question ...'

In front of him, the priest's regular features were serious, but it seemed to Maigret that his eyes blazed with fever.

'This morning, a disturbing event took place. The countess's missal, which was on her prie-dieu, suddenly disappeared and was found hidden under the altar boy's surplice, in this very room ...'

Silence. The sound of the sacristan's footsteps on the church carpet. The louder footsteps of the bell-ringer leaving by a side door.

‘Only four people could have ... I must ask you to excuse me ... The altar boy, the sacristan, the bell-ringer and ...’

‘Me!’

His voice was calm. The priest’s face was lit only on one side by the flickering flame of a candle. From a censer, a thin thread of white smoke rose in spirals towards the ceiling.

‘Was it ...?’

‘I was the one who took the missal and put it here, while waiting for ...’

The box of communion wafers, the cruets, the two-note bell were in their place, as they had been when little Maigret was an altar boy.

‘Did you know what the missal contained?’

‘No.’

‘In that case ...’

‘I must ask you not to question me further, Monsieur Maigret. It’s the secret of the confessional ...’

An involuntary association of ideas. The inspector remembered the catechism, in the dining room at the presbytery. And the edifying image that had formed in his mind when the old priest had told the story of a medieval priest who had had his tongue ripped out rather than betray the secret of the confessional.

He found it preserved intact on his retina, after thirty-five years.

‘You know the murderer ...’ he murmured none the less.

‘God knows him ... Excuse me ... I have to attend to a sick person ...’

They left via the presbytery garden. A little fence separated it from the road, where people leaving the chateau stayed in groups a short distance away to talk about what had happened.

‘Do you think, Father, that it might not be your place ...’

But they bumped into the doctor, who was muttering into his beard:

‘Listen, Father! Do you not think that this is starting to turn into a fairground? ... Perhaps someone should go down there and restore some order, if only to calm the villagers down! ... Oh! You’re here, inspector! ... Well, you’re making a fine mess of things ... As we speak, half the village is accusing the young count of ... Especially since that woman got here! ... The estate manager is going to see the farmers to get together the forty thousand francs which, it seems, are necessary for ...’

‘Dammit!’

Maigret walked away. He was too upset. And wasn’t he being accused of being the cause of the chaos? What blunder had he committed? What had he done? He would have given anything to see events play out in a dignified atmosphere!

He strode towards the inn, which was half full. He heard only the scrap of a sentence:

‘Apparently if they can’t be found he will go to prison ...’

Marie Tatin was the very image of distress. She was pacing back and forth, alert, trotting like an old woman even though she wasn’t more than forty.

‘Is the lemonade for you? ... Who ordered two beers? ...’

In his corner, Jean Métayer was writing, sometimes raising his head to listen in on the conversations.

Maigret walked over to him and couldn’t read his scribbles, but saw that the lines were clearly divided, with only a few crossings-out, each one preceded by a number:

1 ...

2 ...

3 ...

The secretary was preparing his defence as he waited for his lawyer!

A woman a few metres away said, ‘There weren’t even any clean sheets, and they had to go to the estate manager’s wife to ask for them ...’

Pale, with drawn features but a determined expression, Jean Métayer wrote:

4 ...



5. The Second Day

Maigret slept the sleep, at once troubled and sensual, that one only ever has in a cold country room that smells of stables, winter apples and hay. Draughts circulated all around him. And his sheets were frozen, except in the exact spot, the soft, intimate hollow that he had warmed with his body. Consequently, rolled up in a ball, he avoided making the slightest movement.

Several times he had heard the dry cough of Jean Métayer in the neighbouring attic room. Then came the furtive footsteps of Marie Tatin getting up.

He stayed in bed for another few minutes. When he had lit the candle, he couldn't face washing with the icy water from the jug and, deferring the task till later, went downstairs in his slippers, without putting on a detachable collar.

Down below, Marie Tatin was pouring paraffin on a fire that wouldn't light. Her hair was rolled up in hairpins, and she blushed as she saw the inspector appear.

'It isn't yet seven o'clock ... The coffee isn't ready ...'

Maigret had one slight worry. In his half-sleep, half an hour before, he had thought he heard a car passing. And yet Saint-Fiacre isn't on the main road, and there was hardly any traffic apart from the bus that passed through once a day.

'Has the bus left, Marie?'

'Never before half past eight! And more often nine o'clock ...'

'Is that the bell ringing for mass already?'

'Yes! In winter, it's at seven o'clock, six in the summer ... If you want to warm yourself up, sir ...'

She showed him the fire, which was blazing at last.

‘Can’t you bring yourself to call me by my first name?’

Maigret was cross with himself as he caught a flirtatious smile on the poor spinster’s face.

‘The coffee will be ready in five minutes ...’

It wouldn’t be light before eight o’clock. The cold was even keener than on the previous day. Maigret, coat collar turned up and hat down over his eyes, walked slowly towards the patch of light emanating from the church.

It wasn’t a feast day any more. There were only three women in the nave. And there was something slapdash, something furtive about the mass. The priest walked too quickly from one corner of the altar to the other. He turned round too quickly, arms outspread, to murmur, swallowing syllables: ‘*Dominus vobiscum!*’

The altar boy, who was struggling to follow him, said ‘*Amen*’ out of time, and hurried to ring his bell.

Was the panic going to begin again? The murmur of the liturgical prayers could be heard, and sometimes the sound of the priest taking a breath between two words.

‘*Ite missa est ...*’

Had this mass lasted twelve minutes? The three women got to their feet. The priest recited the last passage from the Gospel. A car stopped in front of the church, and a moment later hesitant footsteps were heard in the square.

Maigret had stayed at the end of the nave, standing right next to the door. So when it opened, the new arrival was literally face to face with him.

It was Maurice de Saint-Fiacre. He was so surprised that he nearly beat a retreat, murmuring, ‘Sorry ... I ...’

But he stepped forwards and made an effort to regain his composure.

‘Is mass over?’

He was clearly in a state of nerves. There were circles under his eyes as if he hadn’t slept that night. And when he opened the door he had brought the cold in with him.

‘Have you come from Moulins?’

The two men whispered to one another as the priest recited the prayer after the Gospel, and the women closed their mass-books and picked up their umbrellas and handbags.

‘How did you know? ... Yes ... I ...’

‘Shall we go outside?’

The priest and the altar boy had gone into the sacristy, and the sacristan was snuffing the two candles which were all that had been required for the low mass.

Outside, the horizon was slightly brighter. The white of the nearby houses stood out against the gloom. The yellow car was there, between the trees in the square.

Saint-Fiacre’s unease was obvious. He looked at Maigret with some astonishment, perhaps surprised to see him unshaven, and without a detachable collar under his coat.

‘You got up early! ...’ murmured the inspector.

‘The first train, an express, leaves Moulins at three minutes past seven ...’

‘I don’t understand! You didn’t take the train because ...’

‘You’re forgetting Marie Vassiliev ...’

It was perfectly simple! And natural! The presence of Maurice’s mistress could only be an embarrassment at the chateau. So he drove her to Moulins by car, put her on the Paris train, came back and, in passing, entered the illuminated church.

And yet Maigret wasn’t satisfied. He tried to follow the anxious glances of the count, who seemed to be waiting for something, or to fear something.

‘She doesn’t seem easy!’ the inspector said meaningfully.

‘She’s known better days. And she’s very touchy ... The idea that I might want to hide our relationship ...’

‘Which has lasted for how long?’

‘A little less than a year ... Marie isn’t interested ... There have been embarrassing moments ...’

His eye fixed at last on a single point. Maigret followed it and noticed, behind him, the priest, who had just come out of the church. He had a sense that those two glances had met, that the priest was just as embarrassed as the Count of Saint-Fiacre.

The inspector was about to call out to him. But with awkward haste the priest had already addressed a brief word of greeting to the two men and gone inside the presbytery, as if escaping.

‘He doesn’t look like a country priest ...’

Maurice didn't reply. Through the lit window the priest could be seen sitting over his breakfast, and the housekeeper bringing him a steaming pot of coffee.

Some children, with bags on their backs, were starting to make their way towards the school. The surface of the Notre-Dame pond was assuming the colours of a looking-glass.

'What arrangements have you made for ...' Maigret began.

And the other man replied, far too quickly:

'For what?'

'For the funeral ... Did someone sit vigil in the room of the departed?'

'No! It was briefly discussed ... Gautier said people didn't do that any more ...'

The sound of a two-stroke engine was heard coming from the chateau courtyard. A few moments later a motorbike passed along the road, heading towards Moulins. Maigret recognized Gautier's son, whom he had seen the previous day. He was wearing a beige mackintosh and a checked cap.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre didn't know what attitude to assume. He didn't dare get back into his car. And he had nothing to say to the inspector.

'Did Gautier find the forty thousand francs?'

'No ... Yes ... that is ...'

Maigret looked at him curiously, surprised to see him so agitated.

'Did he find them, yes or no? I had a sense, yesterday, that he wasn't happy about the idea. Because in spite of everything, in spite of the debts and mortgages, you'll be able to raise much more money than that ...'

But no! Maurice didn't reply! He looked distraught, for no apparent reason. And the words he uttered bore no relation to what had gone before.

'Tell me honestly, inspector ... Do you suspect me?'

'Of what?'

'You know ... I need to know ...'

'I have no more reason to suspect you than anyone else ...' Maigret replied evasively.

And his companion pounced on the assertion.

'Thank you! ... Well, that's what you have to tell people ... You understand? ... Otherwise my position isn't tenable ...'

'Which bank does your cheque have to be presented at?'

‘The Comptoir d’Escompte ...’

A woman was walking towards the public laundry, pushing a barrow that carried two baskets of linen. The priest, in his house, paced back and forth, reading his breviary, but the inspector had a sense that he was darting anxious glances at the two men.

‘I’ll join you at the chateau.’

‘Now?’

‘In a moment, yes.’

It was quite plain: Maurice de Saint-Fiacre wasn’t at all happy with that. He got into his car like a condemned man. And behind the windows of the presbytery the priest could be seen watching him leave.

At the very least Maigret wanted to go and put on a collar. Just as he arrived outside the inn, Jean Métayer was coming out of the grocer’s shop. He had merely put a coat on over his pyjamas. He looked triumphantly at the inspector.

‘Phone call?’

And the young man replied sharply, ‘My lawyer will be here at ten to nine.’

He was sure of himself. He sent back some boiled eggs which hadn’t been cooked for long enough and tapped out a march on the table with his fingertips.

From the skylight of his room, where he had gone to get dressed, Maigret could see the courtyard of the chateau, the racing car and Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, who looked as if he didn’t know what to do. Was he preparing to walk towards the village?

The inspector got a move on. A few minutes later he himself was on his way to the chateau. They met about a hundred metres from the church.

‘Where were you going?’ Maigret asked.

‘Nowhere! I don’t know ...’

‘Maybe to pray at the church?’

And those words were enough to turn his companion pale, as if they had a terrible, mysterious significance.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was not built for stress. Superficially, he was a tall, strong young man, athletic and perfectly healthy.

But looking closer you saw that he was soft. His muscles, beneath a layer of fat, seemed to have hardly any energy. He had probably spent a sleepless night, and he looked thoroughly deflated.

‘I assume you’ve had the announcements printed?’

‘No.’

‘But ... the family ... the local aristocrats ...’

The young man lost his temper.

‘They wouldn’t come! You know that very well! Once they would have done! When my father was still alive ... During the hunting season, there would be up to thirty guests at the chateau at once, for weeks ...’

Nobody knew that better than Maigret, who, during the hunting season had, without his parents’ knowledge, loved to wear the white shirt of a beater!

‘Since ...’

And Maurice waved a hand to suggest: ‘Insolvency ... junk ...’

The whole of Berry must have been talking about the mad old woman who was frittering away the last years of her life with so-called secretaries! And farms being sold one after the other! And sons behaving like idiots in Paris!

‘Do you think the funeral might happen tomorrow? ... You understand? ... It would be better to get this business over and done with as soon as possible ...’

A dung cart passed slowly along, and its wide wheels seemed to crush the pebbles in the road. Day had broken, a day greyer than the previous one, but not as windy. In the distance Maigret saw Gautier, who was crossing the courtyard and about to head in his direction.

And it was then that a strange thing happened.

‘Will you excuse me? ...’ the inspector said to his companion, setting off in the direction of the chateau.

He had barely walked a hundred metres when he turned round. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was on the steps of the presbytery. He must have rung the doorbell. And yet, when he saw he had been spotted, he walked away quickly without waiting for a reply.

He didn’t know where to go. His whole bearing proved that he was terribly ill at ease. The inspector caught up with the estate manager, whom he had seen coming towards him and who was waiting for him with an arrogant look.

‘What can I do for you?’

‘I’d like a simple piece of information. Have you found the forty thousand francs the count needs?’

‘No! And I defy anyone to find it around here! Everyone knows what his signature is worth.’

‘And so? ...’

‘He will manage as best he can! It has nothing to do with me!’

Saint-Fiacre turned on his heels. It looked as if he had a desperate urge to do something and that, for one reason or another, he couldn’t. Making up his mind, he strode towards the chateau and stopped near the two men.

‘Gautier! Come to the library so that I can issue you with instructions!’

He began to set off, then said, evidently with some considerable effort:

‘See you shortly, inspector.’

Passing in front of the presbytery, Maigret had the distinct sensation of being watched through the curtains. But he wasn’t sure because, since it was day, the lights were turned out.

A taxi was parked outside Marie Tatin’s inn. In the dining room, a man of about fifty, dressed to the nines, pinstriped trousers and a black silk-lined jacket, was sitting at Jean Métayer’s table.

When he saw the inspector come in, he rose eagerly to his feet, extending a hand.

‘I am told that you are a member of the Police Judiciaire ... Allow me to introduce myself ... Tallier, barrister-at-law, from the court at Bourges ... Will you join us? ...’

Jean Métayer had got to his feet, but his attitude demonstrated that he didn’t approve of his lawyer’s conviviality.

‘Innkeeper! ... We’d like to order, please ...’

And, in a conciliatory voice:

‘What would you like? Given how cold it is, I’d suggest hot rum for everybody? ... Three hot rums, my girl ...’

The girl in question was poor Marie Tatin, who wasn’t used to such manners.

‘I hope, detective chief inspector, that you will forgive my client. If I understand correctly, he has treated you with a degree of suspicion ... But don’t forget that he is a boy from a good family, who is of good character, and who is outraged by the suspicions directed towards him ... His bad mood yesterday, if I may say so, is the best proof of his absolute innocence ...’

With a man such as this, there was no need to say a word. He answered his own questions, while performing suave hand gestures.

‘Of course, I’m still not au fait with all the details ... If I understand correctly, the Countess of Saint-Fiacre died yesterday, during first mass, of a heart attack ... On the other hand, a piece of paper has been found in her missal which suggests that her death was caused by a violent shock ... Did the son of the victim – who happened to be nearby – register a complaint? ... No! ... And such a complaint would, in my opinion, be rejected ... The criminal act – if we may speak of a criminal act – is not in fact sufficiently clear for legal proceedings to be instigated ...

‘We are agreed, are we not? ... No complaint! And hence no legal action.

‘Which is not to say that I don’t understand the inquiry that you are pursuing on a personal, unofficial basis ...

‘My client will not tolerate being hounded in this way. He must be cleared of all suspicion ...

‘Listen to me carefully ... What, in the end, was his situation at the chateau? ... That of an adopted child ... The countess, left on her own, separated from a son who had left her with nothing but problems, was comforted by the devotion and uprightness of her secretary ...

‘My client is no idler ... He did not, as he might easily have done, lead a carefree life at the chateau ... He worked ... He looked for investments ... He even looked into the latest inventions ...

‘Would he have derived any benefit from the death of his benefactress? ... Need I say anything more? ... No! Am I not correct? ...

‘And that, inspector, is what I want to help you establish ...

‘I should add that I will be putting some necessary measures in place in tandem with the notary ... Jean Métayer is a trusting young man ... Never in his life would he have imagined such events taking place ...

‘His belongings are at the chateau, along with the belongings of the late countess ...

‘And yet, as of now, other people have turned up there, with the clear intention of getting their hands on ...’

‘A few pairs of pyjamas and some old slippers!’ groaned Maigret as he got up from his chair.

‘Excuse me?’

Throughout the whole of the conversation, Jean Métayer had been writing things down in a little notebook. And it was he who calmed down his lawyer, who had in turn leaped to his feet.

‘Leave it! I knew straight away that the inspector would be against me! And I have since learned that he belonged indirectly to the chateau, where he was born in the days when his father was the estate manager of the Saint-Fiacres. I warned you ... You were the one who wanted ...’

The clock struck ten. Maigret calculated that Marie Vassiliev’s train would have arrived at the Gare de Lyon half an hour earlier.

‘You will excuse me!’ he said. ‘I will see you again in due course.’

‘But ...’

He in turn stepped into the grocery opposite, whose bell rang. He waited a quarter of an hour for a call to be connected to Paris.

‘Is it true that you’re the son of the old estate manager?’

Maigret was exhausted, more than he would have been after ten normal investigations. He ached, both emotionally and physically.

‘Paris speaking ...’

‘Hello! ... The Comptoir d’Escompte? ... This is the Police Judiciaire ... A piece of information please ... Has a cheque signed Saint-Fiacre been presented this morning? ... You say it was presented at nine o’clock? ... So, insufficient funds ... Hello! ... Please don’t hang up, madam ... You asked the bearer to present it a second time? ... Excellent! ... Ah! That’s what I wanted to know ... A young woman, is that right? ... A quarter of an hour ago? ... And she paid in the forty thousand francs? ... Thank you ... Of course you can pay! ... No! No! Nothing in particular ... Given that the deposit has been made ...’

And Maigret left the cabin with a weary sigh.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, during the night, had found the forty thousand francs and sent his mistress to Paris to deposit them at the bank!

Just as the inspector was leaving the grocer’s shop, he saw the priest leaving his house, clutching his breviary and heading towards the chateau.

Then he speeded up and almost ran to get to the door at the same time as the priest.

He missed him by less than a minute. By the time he reached the main courtyard the door was closing behind the priest. And when he rang the doorbell there were footsteps at the end of the corridor, near the library.



6. The Two Camps

‘Let me go and see if the count can ...’

But the inspector didn’t give the butler time to finish his sentence. He stepped into the corridor and headed for the library. The butler heaved a sigh of resignation. There wasn’t even a way of keeping up appearances any more! People were treating the place like a hotel! It was chaos!

Maigret paused before opening the library door, but to no end, because he didn’t hear a sound. It was, in fact, what gave his entrance an impressive quality.

He knocked, thinking that the priest might be somewhere else. But a voice immediately rang out, clearly and firmly, in the absolute silence of the room:

‘Come in!’

Maigret pushed the door, which happened to catch on an air vent. The Count of Saint-Fiacre, who stood leaning against the gothic table, was looking at him.

Beside him, the priest was staring at the carpet, frozen, as if a single movement would have given him away.

What were they doing there, the two of them, not talking, not moving? It would have been less embarrassing to interrupt an emotional scene than to plunge into that silence, so deep that his voice seemed to trace concentric circles in it like a pebble in water.

Once again Maigret sensed Saint-Fiacre’s weariness. The priest looked ill at ease, and his fingers drummed against his breviary.

‘Forgive me for disturbing you ...’

It sounded ironic, but it wasn’t deliberate. Does one disturb people when they are as inert as inanimate objects?

‘I have some news from the bank ...’

The count’s eyes settled on the priest, and his gaze was harsh, almost furious.

The whole scene would play out in that rhythm. They were like chess-players thinking, foreheads resting on their hands, sitting in silence for a few minutes before moving a pawn and then relapsing into stillness.

But it wasn’t concentration that held them frozen like that. Maigret was certain that it was the fear of making a false move, or some kind of clumsy manoeuvre. The situation between them was ambiguous. And each of them advanced his pawn regretfully, always ready to move it back again.

‘I’ve come for the funeral instructions!’ the priest felt the need to say.

It wasn’t true! A bad move. So bad that the Count of Saint-Fiacre smiled.

‘I knew you would call the bank!’ he said. ‘And I will confess to you why I decided to take that course of action: it was to get rid of Marie Vassiliev, who didn’t want to leave the chateau ... I let her believe that it was of vital importance ...’

And in the eyes of the priest Maigret now read anxiety and reproach.

‘Poor wretch!’ he was doubtless thinking. ‘He’s tying himself up in knots! He’s falling into the trap. He’s lost ...’

Silence. The scrape of a match and puffs of tobacco smoke that the inspector exhaled one by one as he questioned the count:

‘Did Gautier find the money?’

A brief moment’s hesitation.

‘No, inspector ... I’m going to tell you that ...’

The drama was being played out not on Saint-Fiacre’s face, but on the priest’s. The man was pale, his lips taut. He opted not to intervene.

‘Inspector, I ...’

He couldn’t help it.

‘I would like you to suspend this conversation until we have had a private discussion on the matter ...’

Maurice smiled as he had done a few moments before. It was cold in the room, too vast now that the fine books of the library had been removed from it. A fire had been prepared in the hearth. All that was needed was a match to be thrown on it.

‘Do you have a lighter or ...’

And as he bent over the fireplace the priest gave Maigret a desolate, pleading look.

‘Now,’ the count said as he turned back towards the two men, ‘I’m going to explain the situation in a few words. For a reason that I do not know, the parish priest, with the best of intentions, is sure that it was I who ... why mince words? ... who killed my mother! ... Because it is a crime, isn’t it? Even if it isn’t one that falls within the scope of the law ...’

The priest didn’t move, but stood quivering and still as an animal that is aware of an imminent danger, a danger for which it is no match.

‘He must have been very devoted to my mother ... He probably wanted to ensure that the chateau didn’t find itself at the centre of any kind of scandal ... Yesterday evening, via the sacristan, he sent me forty thousand francs and a little note ...’

And the priest’s expression said, beyond any possible doubt:

‘Wretch! You are destroying yourself with your own hands!’

‘Here is the note!’ Saint-Fiacre continued.

Maigret read under his breath: ‘Be careful. I am praying for you ...’

At last! It was like a breath of fresh air. All of a sudden Maurice de Saint-Fiacre no longer felt rooted to the ground, condemned to stillness. And he also stripped away the mask of seriousness, which didn’t match his character.

He started pacing back and forth, a sense of relief apparent in his voice.

‘So, inspector, now you know why you saw me roaming around the church and the presbytery this morning ... I accepted the forty thousand francs, which must obviously be considered a loan, first of all, as I have told you, to get rid of my mistress – forgive me, Father! ... – and also because it would have been particularly disagreeable to be arrested at that moment ... But we are all still standing as if ... Please, do sit down ...’

He went and opened the door and heard a noise on the floor above.

‘The procession is starting up again!’ he murmured. ‘I think I’ll have to call Moulins and ask them to set up a chapel of rest ...’

Then, abruptly:

‘I suppose you understand now! Once I had accepted the money, I had to swear to the priest that I wasn’t guilty. It was hard to do that in front of you,

inspector, without increasing your suspicions ... That's all! ... As if you'd guessed my thoughts, you haven't left me alone for a moment this morning, near the church ... The priest turned up here, I still don't know why, because as soon as you came in he was reluctant to speak ...'

His gaze darkened. To dispel the rancour that assailed him he laughed, an awkward laugh.

'It's simple, isn't it? A man who has lived a riotous life, and who has signed bad cheques ... Old Gautier avoids me! ... He too must be sure that—'

He suddenly looked in amazement at the priest.

'Well, Father ... What did you? ...'

The priest had in fact assumed a funereal appearance. His gaze avoided the young man's, and tried to avoid Maigret's as well.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre understood and exclaimed more bitterly:

'There we are! People still don't believe me ... And the one who wants to save me is the very one convinced of my guilt ...'

He went and opened the door again and called out, forgetting the presence of the dead woman in the house:

'Albert! ... Albert! ... Faster than that, damn it all! ... Bring us something to drink ...'

And the butler came in and walked to a cupboard from which he took whisky and glasses. They watched him in silence. Then Maurice de Saint-Fiacre said with a strange smile:

'In my day there was no whisky in the chateau.'

'It was Monsieur Jean ...'

'Ah!'

He took a great swig and locked the door behind the manservant.

'Many such things have changed ...' he murmured to himself.

But he didn't take his eyes off the priest, who stammered, with mounting unease:

'You will forgive me ... I have to go and do the catechism ...'

'Just one moment ... You are still convinced of my guilt, Father ... No, don't deny it ... Priests don't know how to lie ... But there are a few points I'd like to explain to you ... Because you don't know me ... You weren't at Saint-Fiacre in my day ... You've just heard people talking about me ... There are no material

clues ... The inspector, who witnessed the events, knows something about that ...'

'Please ...' stammered the priest.

'No! ... You're not drinking? ... To your health, inspector ...'

And his face was grim. He was furiously following the train of his thoughts.

'There are lots of people who might fall under suspicion ... And yet your suspicions rest entirely on me ... And I wonder why that is ... It kept me awake last night ... I thought about all the possible reasons, and in the end I think I've found ... What did my mother say to you?'

This time the priest's face drained of blood.

'I don't know anything ...' he stammered.

'Please, Father ... You've helped me, certainly! ... You let me have those forty thousand francs that give me time to breathe and bury my mother in a decent way ... I thank you with all my heart ... Except at the same time, you are letting all your suspicions weigh upon me ... You pray for me ... It's too much, or not enough ...'

And a hint of anger, or menace, began to appear in his voice.

'At first I thought I might be able to have an explanation from you, without Detective Chief Inspector Maigret being present ... Well, I won't conceal the fact that I'm glad he's here too! ... The more I think about it, the more I have a sense that there's something murky ...'

'Monsieur, please don't torture me any more ...'

'And for my part, Father, I warn you that you will not leave here before you have told me the truth!'

He was a different man. He had reached his limit. And like all weak, meek people, his ferocity was excessive.

His voice was now so loud that it must have been audible in the mortuary chamber, just above the library.

'You saw my mother often ... And I imagine that Jean Métayer attended your church as well ... Which of the two told you something? ... It was my mother, wasn't it? ...'

Maigret remembered what he had heard the day before:

The secret of the confessional ...

It was then that he understood the priest's torment, his anxiety, his martyred expression as Saint-Fiacre's torrent of words crashed down on him.

'What could she have told you? ... I know her, after all ... You might say that I was present when things began to slip ... We are among people who know all about life ...'

He looked around, with silent rage:

'There was a time when people only came into this room holding their breath, because my father, the *boss*, was working there ... There was no whisky in the cupboards ... But the shelves were full of books as the combs of a beehive are saturated with honey ...'

And Maigret remembered too!

The count is working ...

And those words were enough to keep the tenant farmers waiting in the hall for two hours!

The count let me into the library ...

And Maigret's father was worried, because it was beginning to sound like an important event.

'He didn't like to waste logs, but instead settled for a paraffin heater that he put right next to him, to supplement the boiler ...' said Maurice de Saint-Fiacre.

And, to the distraught priest:

'You never knew that ... You only ever knew the chateau in a state of chaos ... My mother after she lost her husband ... My mother whose only son got up to all sorts of nonsense in Paris and only ever came home to ask for money ... And then, the secretaries ...'

His eyes were so glistening that Maigret expected to see a tear fall from them at any moment.

'What did she say to you? ... She was afraid to see me turning up, wasn't she? ... She knew there would be yet another hole to fill, something she'd have to sell to put me back on my feet once again ...'

'You should calm down!' the priest said in a flat voice.

'Not before knowing ... whether you've suspected me without knowing me from the very first moment ...'

Maigret broke in.

'The priest made the missal disappear ...' he said slowly.

He had already worked it out! He was coming to the aid of Saint-Fiacre. He imagined the countess, torn between sin and remorse ... Didn't she fear punishment? ... Didn't she feel a little ashamed before her son? ...

She was a sick and troubled soul! And why, in the secret of the confessional, might she not one day have said, 'I'm afraid of my son ...'

Because she must have been afraid of him. The money that passed to people like Jean Métayer was Saint-Fiacre money, meant for Maurice. Was he not bound to come sooner or later and ask for an explanation? Would he not ...

And Maigret felt that these ideas were dawning, still confused, in the young man's brain. He helped him to set them out more clearly.

'The priest can't say anything if the countess's words were spoken under the secret of the confessional ...'

It was quite clear. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre broke off the conversation.

'You will forgive me, Father ... I forgot your catechism ... Please don't be angry with me for ...'

He turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

'Thank you ... As soon as ... as soon as possible I'll give you back the forty thousand francs ... Because I assume they don't belong to you ...'

'I approached Madame Ruinard, the widow of the old notary ...'

'Thank you ... Goodbye ...'

He nearly slammed the door but restrained himself and looked Maigret in the eyes, snapping:

'What rubbish!'

'He wanted ...'

'He wanted to save me, I know! ... He was trying to avoid a scandal, somehow to glue the pieces of the Château de Saint-Fiacre back together ... That's not the point! ...'

He poured himself some whisky.

'It's that poor woman I'm thinking about! ... Take Marie Vassiliev, for example ... And all the others, in Paris ... They have no pangs of conscience ... While she, on the other hand! ... And bear in mind that what she wanted above all from that fellow Métayer was affection ... Then she hurried to the confessional ... She must have seen herself as a monster ... And from there to fearing my revenge ... Ha! Ha! ...'

His laugh was terrifying.

‘You see me raging furiously at my mother because ... And the priest hasn’t understood a thing! ... He sees life purely in terms of the scriptures! ... In my mother’s lifetime, he must have tried to save her from herself ... Now that my mother is dead, he thought it was his duty to save me ... But right now, I’m willing to bet, he’s convinced that I was the one who ...’

And he looked the inspector straight in the eye and said:

‘And what about you?’

And when Maigret didn’t reply:

‘Because there has been a crime ... A crime that only the worst kind of wretch could commit ... A revolting coward! ... Is the law really powerless to deal with him? ... That’s what you said ... But there’s something I want to tell you, inspector, and I grant you permission to use it against me ... When I get hold of that little scoundrel, I’m the one he’ll have to deal with ... And I won’t need a gun! No, no weapons ... These hands will be quite enough! ...’

He was clearly fired up by alcohol. He must have been aware of it, because he ran his hand over his brow, looked at his reflection in the mirror and addressed a mocking grimace to himself.

‘However it’s also true that without the priest I would have been arrested even before the funeral! I haven’t been very nice to him ... The old notary’s wife who’s paying my debts ... Who is she? ... I don’t even remember her ...’

‘The lady who always dresses in white ... The house with the gate with gold arrows, on the Matignon road ...’

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre calmed down. His fever had only been a flash in the pan. He began to pour himself a drink, hesitated, drained the contents of his glass in one go, with a pout of revulsion.

‘Do you hear that?’

‘What?’

‘The locals filing past upstairs! I should be up there, in mourning, red-eyed, shaking hands and looking grief-stricken! Once they’re outside they’ll start talking ...’

And, in a suspicious voice:

‘But in fact if, as you say, the law can do nothing about the affair, why are you staying in Saint-Fiacre?’

‘Something else might happen ...’

‘And if I discovered the guilty party, would you stop me from ...’

His clenched fingers were more eloquent than any speech.

‘I will leave you now,’ Maigret said abruptly. ‘I must go and keep an eye on the other front ...’

‘The other front?’

‘The one at the inn! Jean Métayer and his lawyer, who arrived this morning ...’

‘He’s got a lawyer?’

‘He’s a far-sighted young man ... This morning, people were organized like this: at the chateau, you and the priest; at the inn, the young man and his counsel ...’

‘Do you think he was capable of ...’

‘Please excuse me if I serve myself?’

And Maigret drank a glass, wiped his lips and stuffed one last pipe before leaving.

‘I assume you don’t know how to use a linotype machine?’

A shrug.

‘I don’t know how to use anything at all ... That’s precisely the problem! ...’

‘And you’re not going to leave the village without telling me under any circumstances, are you?’

A serious, deep expression. And a serious, deep voice:

‘I promise you!’

Maigret went outside. He was about to walk down the steps when suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a man standing next to him.

‘Excuse me, inspector ... I wonder if you might give me a few moments of your time ... I’ve heard ...’

‘What?’

‘That you were almost part of the household ... Your father was in the trade ... Please do me the honour of coming to my house and joining me for a drink ...’

And the grey-bearded estate manager led his companion across the courtyards. Everything was ready at his house. A bottle of brandy whose label announced its

venerable age. Some biscuits. A smell of cabbage and bacon came from the kitchen.

‘From what I’ve heard, you knew the chateau in different circumstances ... When I arrived there, the chaos was just beginning ... There was a young man from Paris who ... This brandy is from the days of the old count ... No sugar, I assume?’

Maigret stared at the table with the carved lions holding brass rings in their mouths. And once again he felt his physical and emotional exhaustion. In the old days, he had only been allowed to come into this room in his slippers, because of the waxed parquet.

‘I’m very embarrassed ... And you’re the one whose advice I want to ask ... We are poor people. You are familiar with the estate manager’s trade, which doesn’t make a man rich ...

‘Some Saturdays when there was no money in the cash box, I paid the farm workers myself ...

‘And sometimes I even paid for the livestock that the tenant farmers said they needed ...’

‘In other words, to cut a long story short, the countess owed you money!’

‘The countess didn’t know anything about business ... The money disappeared in all directions ... It was only for indispensable matters that none could be found.’

‘And it was you who ...’

‘Your father would have done the same, wouldn’t he? There are times when you mustn’t let the local people know that the coffers are empty ... I took money from my savings ...’

‘How much?’

‘Another little glass? ... I didn’t do the sums. At least seventy thousand ... And now once again, for the funeral, I’m the one who ...’

Maigret saw it vividly: his father’s little office, near the stables, at five o’clock on Saturday. All the people who worked at the chateau, from linen maids to day labourers, waited outside. And old Maigret, sitting in the office lined with green baize, made little piles of silver coins. They all passed by in turn and wrote their signature or a cross in the accounts book.

‘Now I wonder how I’m going to recover the ... For people like us it’s ...’

‘Yes, I understand! You’ve had the fireplace changed!’

‘Well, it was made of wood ... The marble looks better ...’

‘A lot better!’ muttered Maigret.

‘You understand! All the creditors will pounce on us! We’ll have to sell up! And with all these mortgages ...’

The armchair Maigret was sitting in was new, like the mantelpiece, and must have come from a shop on Boulevard Barbès. There was a phonograph on the sideboard.

‘If I had no sons I wouldn’t mind, but Émile has his career to think of ... I don’t want to rush things ...’

A girl crossed the corridor.

‘Do you have a daughter as well?’

‘No! She’s a local girl who comes and helps out.’

‘Well! We’ll talk again, Monsieur Gautier. Excuse me, but I’ve still got lots of things to do ...’

‘One last little glass?’

‘No, thank you ... You said around seventy-five thousand, didn’t you?’ And he left, hands in his pockets, passed through the flock of geese, walked along the Notre-Dame pond, which was no longer lapping at the shore. The church clock rang on the stroke of noon.

At Marie Tatin’s, Jean Métayer and the lawyer were having lunch. Sardines, herring fillets and garlic sausage for starters. On the nearby table were the glasses that had held the aperitifs.

The two men were in a cheerful mood. They welcomed Maigret with ironic glances. They winked at each other. The lawyer’s briefcase was closed.

‘Did you find any truffles for the chicken, at least?’ he asked.

Poor Marie Tatin! She had found a very small tin in the grocer’s, but she couldn’t get it open. She didn’t dare admit it.

‘I found some, monsieur!’

‘Then hurry up! This country air gives you a terrific appetite!’

It was Maigret who went to the kitchen and who used his knife to cut into the metal of the tin while the cross-eyed woman stammered in a low voice:

‘I’m confused ... I ...’

‘Shut up, Marie!’ he muttered.

One camp ... Two camps ... Three camps?

He felt a need to joke to escape reality.

‘By the way! The priest asked me to bring you three hundred indulgences! To make up for your sins!’

And Marie Tatin, who didn’t get the joke, looked up at her companion with a mixture of fear and respectful affection.



7. Appointments in Moulins

Maigret had phoned Moulins to order a taxi. At first he was surprised to see one arriving about ten minutes after his call, but, as he was heading for the door, the lawyer, who had been finishing his coffee, cut in.

‘Sorry! That’s ours ... But if you want to join us ...’

‘Thank you, but ...’

Jean Métayer and the lawyer left first, in a big car that still bore the family crest of its former owner. A quarter of an hour later Maigret left in turn and as he travelled along, chatting to the driver, he observed the landscape.

The setting was monotonous: two rows of poplars along the road, ploughed fields as far as the eye could see, with the occasional rectangle of copse, and the blue-green eye of a pond.

Most of the houses were little shacks. This made sense, because there were no small landowners.

Nothing but large estates, one of which, the one that belonged to the Duke of T— included three villages.

The Saint-Fiacre estate had covered two thousand hectares before the sequence of sales.

The sole means of transport was an old Paris bus bought by a farmer, which travelled between Moulins and Saint-Fiacre once a day.

‘We’re in the middle of the countryside here,’ said the driver. ‘You haven’t seen anything yet. But in the depths of winter ...’

As they drove along the main Moulins road the clock on the church of Saint-Pierre struck half past two. Maigret stopped the cab outside the Comptoir

d'Escompte and paid the fare. Just as he turned away from the taxi to head towards the bank, a woman came out of it, holding a little boy by the hand.

And the inspector quickly immersed himself in the contemplation of a shop window so as not to be noticed. She was a countrywoman in her Sunday best, her hat balanced on her hair, her waist constrained by a corset. She held herself upright, dragging the child along behind her, paying him no more heed than she would have done to a parcel.

It was the mother of Ernest, the Saint-Fiacre altar boy.

The street was busy. Ernest would have liked to stop and look at the window displays, but he was caught up in the wake of the black skirt. Nevertheless, his mother bent down to say something to him. And, as if it had been decided in advance, she stepped inside a toyshop with him.

Maigret didn't dare to get too close. And yet he received the information he needed in the form of some whistle-blasts that emanated from the shop a moment later. They were trying out every imaginable whistle, and in the end the altar boy had to opt for a two-note boy-scout model.

When he came out he was wearing it around his neck, but his mother continued to drag him along and wouldn't let him use the instrument in the street.

A bank branch like any other in the provinces. A long oak counter. Five clerks leaning on desks. Maigret made for the counter marked 'Current Accounts', and a clerk rose to his feet and waited to serve him.

Maigret wanted to find out about the exact state of the Saint-Fiacre fortune, and particularly about the transactions of the previous few weeks, or indeed the previous few days, which he thought might provide him with a clue.

But he paused in silence for a moment, studying the young man who stood there politely, without a hint of impatience.

'Émile Gautier, I assume?'

He had seen him pass by twice on his motorbike, although hadn't been able to make out his features. But it was the striking resemblance to the estate manager of the chateau that left no doubt.

Not so much a resemblance in terms of detail as a resemblance in terms of breeding. The same peasant origins: marked features, robust bones.

His degree of social advancement was more or less the same, his skin better groomed than that of the farmers, his expression intelligent, his assurance that of an 'educated' man.

But Émile wasn't yet a city type. His hair, although brilliantined, was still rebellious and stood up in a tuft on the top of his head. His cheeks were pink, like those of village toughs, scrubbed clean on Sunday mornings.

'That's me.'

He wasn't troubled. Maigret was sure that he must be a model employee, in whom his manager had every confidence and who would soon be due for promotion.

A black suit, made to measure but by a local tailor, in indestructible serge. His father wore celluloid collars. He, on the other hand, wore soft ones, but his tie was still elastic.

'Do you recognize me?'

'No! I assume you're the policeman ...'

'And I would like some information about the state of the Saint-Fiacre account.'

'That's easy! I've been put in charge of that account, as I have of many others.'

He was polite, well brought up. At school he must have been the teacher's pet.

'Let me have a look at the Saint-Fiacre account!' he said to a clerk sitting behind him.

And his eye skimmed a big sheet of yellow paper.

'Would you like a statement, the balance or general information?'

At least he was precise!

'Would general information be all right?'

'Would you mind coming over here? ... People might hear us ...'

And they reached the end of the room but were still separated by the oak counter.

'My father must have told you the countess was very chaotic ... I was constantly having to stop cheques that would otherwise have bounced ... In fact she wasn't aware of it ... She drew cheques without worrying about the state of her account ... And then, when I phoned her to let her know, she lost her

head ... Even this morning, three dud cheques were presented, and I was forced to turn them down ... I've been given an order not to pay anything before ...'

'Is she completely ruined?'

'Not exactly ... Three farms out of five have been sold ... The two others have been mortgaged, along with the chateau ... The countess had a block of flats in Paris that brought her in a small income ... But when all of a sudden she paid forty or fifty thousand francs into her son's account, it threw everything out of kilter ... I always tried to do what I could ... I delayed payments two or three times ... My father ...'

'Lent some money, I know.'

'That's all I can tell you ... Right now, the balance is exactly seven hundred and seventy-five francs ... Bear in mind that property tax hasn't been paid for last year, and that the bailiff issued a first warning last week ...'

'Is Jean Métayer aware of this?'

'He's aware of everything! And perhaps more than aware.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing!'

'Do you think he has his feet on the ground?'

But Émile Gautier, the soul of discretion, did not reply.

'Is that all you want to know?'

'Do any other residents of Saint-Fiacre have their accounts at your branch?'

'No!'

'No one came today to make a transaction? To cash a cheque, for example?'

'No one.'

'And you were at your counter all the time?'

'I never left it!'

He wasn't concerned. Ever the model employee, he replied as one must to an important person.

'Would you like to see the manager? Although he won't be able to tell you more than I can ...'

The streetlights were coming on. The main street was so busy it was almost like a big city, and there were long queues of cars outside the cafés.

A procession was passing by: two camels and a baby elephant bearing advertising streamers for a circus set up in Place de la Victoire. In a grocer's shop, Maigret noticed the altar boy's mother, still holding him by the hand and buying tins of food.

A little further on he nearly bumped into Métayer and his lawyer, who were walking busily along, talking. The lawyer was saying:

'... they'll have to block it ...'

They didn't see the inspector and carried on towards the Comptoir d'Escompte.

You inevitably meet everyone ten times an afternoon, in a town that consists entirely of a street five hundred metres long.

Maigret was on his way to the printworks of the *Journal de Moulins*. The offices were at the front of the building: modern shop windows, with a large display of press photographs and the latest news, handwritten in blue pencil, on long strips of paper.

Mondchourie. The Havas Press Agency informs us that ...

But, to get to the printworks, one had first to turn down a dark alley, guided by the noise of the rotary press. In a desolate studio, men in overalls worked at tall marble tables. In a glazed cage at the end were the two linotypes, rattling away like machine guns.

'The foreman, please ...'

He literally had to shout, because of the thundering noise of the machines. The smell of ink caught his throat. A little man in blue overalls who was setting the type in a press form cupped a hand to his ear.

'Are you the foreman?'

'I'm the page setter!'

Maigret took from his wallet the piece of paper that had killed the Countess of Saint-Fiacre. The man put on steel-rimmed glasses, looked at it and wondered what it might mean.

'Is this one of yours?'

'What? ...'

People ran past, carrying piles of newspapers.

'I'm asking you if this was printed here.'

'Come with me!'

It was easier in the courtyard. It was cold, but at least they could talk in an almost normal voice.

‘What did you ask me?’

‘Do you recognize the type?’

‘It’s 9-point Cheltenham.’

‘From here?’

‘Almost all linotypes use Cheltenham.’

‘Are there other linotypes in Moulins?’

‘Not in Moulins ... But in Nevers, in Bourges, in Chateauroux, in Autun, in ...’

‘Is there anything special about this particular document?’

‘It’s been printed using a planer ... They wanted to make it look like a newspaper cutting, didn’t they? ... I was once asked to do the same thing, for a joke ...’

‘Aha!’

‘At least fifteen years ago ... When we still set the newspaper by hand ...’

‘And the paper doesn’t give you a clue?’

‘Almost all provincial newspapers use the same supplier. It’s German paper ... Excuse me ... I have to finish setting the type ... It’s for the Nièvre edition ...’

‘Do you know Jean Métayer?’

The man shrugged.

‘What do you think of him?’

‘To listen to him you’d think he knew the trade better than we do. He’s got a screw loose ... We let him fiddle about in the workshop, because of the countess, who’s a friend of the boss ...’

‘Can he use a linotype machine?’

‘Hmm! ... Well, he says he can! ...’

‘Well, could he have set this paragraph?’

‘If he had a good two hours to spare ... Starting the same line ten times over again ...’

‘Did he have access to a linotype machine any time recently?’

‘What do I know? He comes! He goes! He irritates us all with his photographic techniques ... You’ll forgive me ... The train won’t wait ... And

my form isn't finished yet ...'

There was no point pressing the matter. Maigret was about to go into the studio again, but the bustling activity in there put him off. These people didn't have much time on their hands. Everyone was running. The porters jostled him as they hurried to the exit.

But he did manage to take aside an apprentice who was rolling a cigarette.

'What do you do with the lines of lead type once they've been used?'

'They're melted down again.'

'How often?'

'Every two days ... Look! The foundry's over there, in the corner ... Careful! It's hot ...'

Maigret went outside, a little weary, perhaps slightly discouraged. Night had fallen completely now. The pavement gleamed more brightly than usual because of the cold. Outside a draper's shop, a salesman with a head cold was pacing back and forth, accosting passers-by.

'A winter coat? ... Lovely bit of English fabric from only two hundred francs ... Come in! No obligation to buy ...'

A little further along, outside the Café de Paris, where the click of billiard balls could be heard, Maigret spotted the Count of Saint-Fiacre's yellow car.

He went inside, looked around for the man and, not finding him, sat down at a table. This was the town's smartest café. On a raised platform, three musicians were tuning up and sorting out the sequence of their set with three cards, each one bearing a number.

A sound came from the phone cabin.

'A beer!' Maigret said to the waiter.

'Light or dark?'

But the inspector was struggling to hear the voice in the cabin. He couldn't quite make it out. Saint-Fiacre came out, and the cashier asked him:

'How many calls?'

'Three.'

'To Paris, yes? ... Three times eight eighty ...'

The count spotted Maigret and came towards him quite casually and sat down beside him.

‘You didn’t tell me you were coming to Moulins! I would have given you a lift ... Admittedly it’s a coupé, and in this weather ...’

‘Were you calling Marie Vassiliev?’

‘No! I don’t know why I would hide the truth from you ... I’ll have a beer too, waiter ... No, in fact! Something hot ... a hot rum ... I was calling a certain Monsieur Wolf ... If you don’t know him, others are bound to, Quai des Orfèvres ... A money-lender, if you like ... I’ve resorted to his services several times ... I’ve just been trying to ...’

Maigret gave him a quizzical look.

‘Were you asking him for money?’

‘On any terms! And he refused anyway. Don’t look at me like that! This afternoon I called in at the bank ...’

‘At what time?’

‘Around three ... The young man you know and his lawyer were coming out ...’

‘Were you trying to withdraw money?’

‘I tried! Don’t think for a moment that I’m trying to make you feel sorry for me! Some people are embarrassed when it comes to money. Not me ... So! Once the forty thousand francs had been sent to Paris and Marie Vassiliev’s train ticket bought, I’ve got about three hundred francs in my pocket. When I came here I hadn’t foreseen any of this ... I’ve just got the suit on my back ... In Paris I owe several thousand francs to the landlady of my flat, who won’t let me have my belongings ...’

As he spoke, he watched the balls rolling on the green baize of the billiard table. The billiard-players were some young men from the town, of modest origins, who cast the occasional envious glance at the count’s elegant outfit.

‘That’s all! I would have liked at the very least to be in mourning for the funeral. There isn’t a tailor in the country who would give me two days of credit ... At the bank, they told me my mother’s account was blocked, and also that the balance came to just over seven hundred francs ... And do you know who gave me this pleasant information?’

‘The son of your estate manager!’

‘The very same!’

He took a swig of the steaming rum and fell silent, still watching the billiards. The band struck up a Viennese waltz which seemed to be oddly in time with the sound of the billiard balls.

It was hot. The café was plunged in greyish murk, in spite of the electric lights. It was an old-fashioned provincial café, with only one concession to modernity in the form of a poster which announced: 'Cocktails 6 francs.'

Maigret smoked slowly. He too stared at the billiard table, lit harshly by lamps in green cardboard shades. From time to time the door opened, and after a few seconds a gust of frosty air caught them by surprise.

'Let's go and sit at the back ...'

It was the voice of the lawyer from Bourges. He passed by the table at which the two men were sitting, followed by Jean Métayer, who was wearing white woollen gloves.

But they both looked straight ahead. They didn't see the others until they had sat down.

The two tables were almost facing one another. Métayer blushed slightly and ordered firmly:

'A hot chocolate!'

And Saint-Fiacre joked under his breath:

'Poor love!'

A woman sat down an equal distance from the two tables and, giving the waiter a familiar smile, murmured:

'The usual!'

He brought her a cherry brandy. She powdered her face and put on some lipstick. And she fluttered her eyelashes, unsure which table to focus her gaze upon.

Was Maigret, tall and comfortable, the one she should target? Was it the more elegant lawyer, already looking her up and down with a half-smile?

'And there you have it! I'll be attending the funeral in grey!' murmured the Count of Saint-Fiacre. 'I can hardly borrow a black suit from the butler! Or wear one of my late father's morning coats!'

Apart from the lawyer, whose interest was focused on the woman, everyone was looking at the nearest billiard table.

There were three of them. Two were occupied. Cries of ‘bravo!’ erupted as the musicians concluded their piece. And all of a sudden, the sound of glasses and saucers could be heard again.

‘Three ports, three!’

The door opened and closed again. The cold came in and was gradually absorbed by the warmth of the room.

The lamps above the third billiard table came on when the cashier turned to flick the electric switches, which were behind her back.

‘Thirty points!’ said a voice.

And, to the waiter:

‘A glass of Vichy ... No! A Vittel with strawberry syrup ...’

It was Émile Gautier, who was carefully coating the tip of his cue with blue chalk. Then he set the marker to zero. His companion was the sub-manager of the bank, ten years his senior, with a pointed brown moustache.

It was only on his third stroke – which he missed – that he spotted Maigret. He greeted him slightly awkwardly. From that point on he was so engrossed in the game that he no longer had time to see anybody at all.

‘Of course, if you’re not scared of the cold there’s room in my car ...’ said Maurice de Saint-Fiacre. ‘Can I get you something? I’m sure one drink isn’t going to finish me off ...’

‘Waiter!’ said Jean Métayer loudly. ‘Put a call through to Bourges 17!’

His father’s number! A few moments later he closed himself in the cabin.

Maigret was still smoking. He had ordered a second beer. And the woman had finally focused her attention on him, perhaps because he was the largest person present. Every time he turned towards her she smiled at him as if they were old acquaintances.

She probably had little idea that he was thinking about the old woman, as the son himself called her, who was laid out on the first floor of the chateau, with the locals processing past her and nudging one another.

But that was not how he saw her. He imagined her at a time when there had not yet been any cars outside the Café de Paris, and when no one drank cocktails.

In the grounds of the chateau, tall and lithe, elegant as the heroine of a popular novel, beside the pram being pushed by the nanny ...

Maigret was only a little boy whose hair, like the hair of Émile Gautier and the altar boy, insisted on standing up in a tuft on the top of his head.

Was he not jealous of the count on the morning when the couple had left for Aix-les-Bains, in a car (one of the first in the area) full of furs and perfume? Her face was hidden behind her veil. The count was wearing big goggles. It looked like a heroic abduction. And the nanny was holding the baby's hand, waving goodbye ...

Now, the old woman was being sprinkled with holy water, and the bedroom smelled of candle-wax.

Preoccupied, Émile walked around the billiard table, playing like a dream, counting under his breath, importantly:

‘Seven ...’

He lined up his shot again. He was winning. His boss with the pointed moustache said in a thin voice:

‘Terrific!’

Two men studied each other across the green baize: Jean Métayer, to whom the lawyer was speaking incessantly with a smile on his face, and the Count of Saint-Fiacre, who stopped the waiter with a languid gesture.

‘Same again!’

As to Maigret, he was now thinking about a boy-scout whistle. A two-note whistle, in bronze, of the kind he himself had never owned.



8. An Invitation to Dinner

‘Another phone call!’ sighed Maigret as he saw Métayer getting up yet again.

He watched after him and noted that he didn’t go into either the cabin or the lavatory. The podgy lawyer, meanwhile, was no longer perched on the edge of his chair like someone hesitating to get up. He was looking at the Count of Saint-Fiacre. He looked almost as if he was about to smile.

Was it Maigret who was superfluous? The scene, at any rate, reminded the inspector of certain situations from his youth: three or four friends, in a bar like this; two women at the other end of the room. Discussions, hesitation, calling the waiter, to pass him a note ...

The lawyer was in the same state of nerves. And the woman sitting two tables away from Maigret mistakenly thought that she was the source of the agitation. She smiled, opened her handbag and put a little powder on her face.

‘I’ll be back in a moment!’ said the inspector to his companion.

He crossed the bar in the direction that Métayer had taken and saw a door that he hadn’t noticed, which opened on to a wide corridor with a red carpet. At the end of the corridor was a counter with a big book and a telephone switchboard, a receptionist. Métayer was there, finishing a conversation with the girl. He left her just as Maigret stepped forwards.

‘Thank you, mademoiselle ... The first on the left, you say?’

He didn’t hide from the inspector. He didn’t seem bothered by his presence. On the contrary! And a little flame of joy flickered in his eyes.

‘I didn’t know it was a hotel ...’ Maigret said to the girl.

‘Are you staying somewhere else? ... You’ve made a mistake ... This is the best hotel in Moulins ...’

‘Didn’t you have the Count of Saint-Fiacre staying here?’

She nearly laughed. Then all of a sudden she turned serious.

‘What has he done?’ she asked with some concern. ‘This is the second time in five minutes that ...’

‘Where did you send my predecessor?’

‘He wants to know if the Count of Saint-Fiacre went out during the night from Saturday to Sunday ... I can’t answer now, because the night watchman hasn’t turned up ... So this gentleman asked me if we had a garage and he went there ...’

Good heavens! Maigret had only to follow Métayer!

‘And the garage is in the first street on the left!’ he said, slightly irritated.

‘Exactly! It’s open all night.’

Jean Métayer had obviously been quick, because when Maigret stepped into the street in question, he emerged from it, whistling. The watchman was having a snack in a corner.

‘I want to know the same thing as the gentleman who just left ... The yellow car ... Did someone come and get it during the night between Saturday and Sunday? ...’

There was already a ten-franc note on the table. Maigret set down a second one.

‘At about midnight, yes!’

‘And they brought it back?’

‘Perhaps at three o’clock in the morning ...’

‘Was it dirty?’

‘A little bit, perhaps ... You know, the weather’s dry at the moment ...’

‘There were two of them, weren’t there? A man and a woman ...’

‘No! Just a man on his own.’

‘Small and thin?’

‘No! On the contrary, very tall and athletic.’

The Count of Saint-Fiacre, of course!

When Maigret entered the café, the band was in full swing once more, and the first thing he noticed was that the corner where Métayer and his companion had been sitting was empty.

But a few seconds later he found the lawyer sitting in his own seat, beside the Count of Saint-Fiacre.

When Maigret appeared, he rose to his feet.

‘Please excuse me ... No, really! Sit where you were, please ...’

He had no intention of leaving. He sat down on the chair facing him. He was very animated, his cheeks flushed, like someone in a hurry to finish a delicate job. He seemed to be looking around for Jean Métayer, but there was no sign of him.

‘You will understand, inspector ... I wouldn’t have dared to go to the chateau. That’s normal ... But since chance will have it that we meet on neutral terrain, if I might put it that way ...’

And he forced a smile. After each phrase he looked as if he was greeting the two others, thanking them for their approval.

‘In a situation as awkward as this there’s no point, as I have told my client, in complicating things further by being overly touchy ... Jean Métayer has understood very clearly ... And, when you turned up, inspector, I was just telling the Count of Saint-Fiacre that we asked only to reach an agreement ...’

Maigret murmured:

‘Good heavens!’

And he thought very precisely: *You, young fellow, will be lucky if the fist of the man you’re talking to so smoothly doesn’t make contact with your face ...*

The billiard-players went on walking around the green baize. The woman got up, left her handbag on the table and went to the end of the room.

Someone else who’s making a big mistake. She’s just had a bright idea. Didn’t Métayer go outside to talk to her without a witness? ... So, she’s going off to find him ...

And Maigret wasn’t mistaken. Hand on hip, the woman was pacing back and forth, looking for the young man.

The lawyer was still talking.

‘There are very complex interests involved, and we for our part are willing ...’

‘To do what?’ Saint-Fiacre cut in.

‘Well ... to ...’

He forgot that the glass within reach wasn’t his and drank from Maigret’s in order to maintain his composure.

‘I realize it may not have been the best choice of place ... Or of time ... But we do know better than anyone else about the financial situation of ...’

‘Of my mother! So?’

‘My client, with a delicacy that does him credit, preferred to stay at the inn ...’

That poor lawyer! The words, now that Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was staring at him, issued from his throat one by one as if he’d had to tear them out.

‘You understand me, don’t you, inspector? We know there is a will deposited with the notary ... Don’t worry! The rights of the count will be respected ... But Jean Métayer is mentioned none the less. The financial affairs are confused. My client is the only one who knows them ...’

Maigret admired Saint-Fiacre, who managed to remain almost angelically calm. There was even a faint smile playing on his lips!

‘Yes! He was a model secretary!’ he said without a hint of irony.

‘Bear in mind that he is a boy from an excellent family, who has had a solid upbringing. I know his parents ... his father ...’

‘Can we get back to the fortune?’

It was too good to be true. The lawyer could hardly believe his ears.

‘Will you let me buy a round? Waiter! The same again, gentlemen? I’ll have a St Raphaël and lemon ...’

Two tables away the woman came back with a gloomy expression because she hadn’t been able to find anything, and was resigning herself to launching an assault on the billiard-players.

‘I was saying that my client is willing to help you. There are people he doesn’t trust. He’ll tell you himself that some shady operations have been carried out by people not over-burdened with scruples ... So ...’

Now came the hard part! In spite of everything, the lawyer had to swallow his saliva before he was able to continue:

‘You found the chateau coffers empty ... And yet it is indispensable that your mother, her ladyship ...’

‘Your mother, her ladyship!’ Maigret repeated admiringly.

‘Your mother, her ladyship ...’ the lawyer continued without blinking. ‘Where was I? Yes! That the funeral should be worthy of Saint-Fiacre ... As we wait for everything to be sorted out in everyone’s best interests, my client will set about ...’

‘In other words, he will advance the funds necessary for the funeral ... Is that it?’

Maigret didn’t dare to look at the count. He stared at Émile Gautier, who had just played another long break, and waited, nerves on edge, for a row to break out next to him.

Not a bit of it! Saint-Fiacre had risen to his feet and was talking to someone who had approached their table.

‘Please, come and join us!’

It was Métayer. Seeing him come in, the lawyer must have waved to him to tell him everything was going well.

‘A St Raphaël and lemon for you too? Waiter!’

A round of applause rang out in the hall, because the band had finished its piece. And once the background noise had stopped it was more awkward, because the voices rang out more clearly. Now the silence was broken only by the click of the ivory billiard balls.

‘I told his lordship, who understood very well ...’

‘Who’s having the Raphaël?’

‘Did you come from Saint-Fiacre by taxi, gentlemen? In that case I will put my car at your disposal to drive you back ... You’ll be a bit cramped. I’m already bringing the inspector ... How much was that? No, I insist, it’s my round ...’

But the lawyer had got to his feet and was putting a hundred-franc note into the hand of the waiter, who asked him, ‘All together?’

‘Of course! Of course!’

And the count said with his most gracious smile, ‘Too charming of you, too charming.’

Émile Gautier watched the four men leaving and politely standing aside to let one another pass in the doorway and forgot to get on with his game.

The lawyer sat in the front, beside Saint-Fiacre, who was driving. Behind him, Maigret made just enough room for Jean Métayer.

It was cold. The headlights weren't bright enough. The car had no silencer, which made it impossible to talk.

Was Maurice de Saint-Fiacre used to driving at such speed? Was he taking a little revenge? Either way, he covered the twenty-five kilometres from Moulins to the chateau in less than a quarter of an hour, braking through the corners, hurtling through the dark, once only just avoiding a cart that was taking up the middle of the road, which forced him to climb up the slope.

Their faces were whipped by the breeze. Maigret had to clutch the collar of his overcoat with both hands. They passed through the village without slowing down. They could just make out the light of the inn, then the pointed spire of the church.

The car stopped abruptly, throwing the passengers against one another. They were at the bottom of the steps. Servants could be seen eating in the basement kitchen. Someone laughed loudly.

'You'll allow me, gentlemen, to invite you to dinner ...'

Métayer and the lawyer looked hesitantly at one another. The count pushed them inside with a friendly pat on the shoulder.

'Please ... It's my turn, isn't it?'

And, in the hall:

'I'm afraid it won't be very cheerful ...'

Maigret would have liked to say a few words in particular, but the count wouldn't give him time and opened the door to the smoking room.

'Will you wait for me for a few moments and have an aperitif? I need to give some instructions. Do you know where the bottles are, Monsieur Métayer? Do we have anything drinkable? ...'

He pressed an electric switch. The butler was a long time coming and arrived with his mouth full and a napkin in his hand.

Saint-Fiacre briskly took it from him.

'Call the estate manager ... Then please call the presbytery for me, then the doctor's house ...'

And to the others:

'Will you excuse me?'

The telephone was in the hall, which, like the rest of the chateau, was badly lit. In fact, since there was no electricity supply in Saint-Fiacre, the chateau had to make its own power, and the generator wasn't powerful enough. The lightbulbs, rather than giving off a white light, revealed reddish filaments, as some trams do when they stop.

There were lots of deep shadows, in which it was barely possible to make out objects.

'Hello ... Yes, I'd love to ... Thank you, doctor ...'

Maigret and the lawyer were worried, but they didn't yet dare admit their concern. It was Métayer who broke the silence by asking the inspector:

'What can I offer you? I don't think there's any port left. But there are some spirits ...'

All the ground-floor rooms were in a row, separated by big open doors. First the dining room. Then the drawing room. Then the smoking room, where the three men were sitting. And then the library, where the young man went to get some bottles.

'Hello! ... Yes ... Can I count on it? ... Straight away ...'

The count spoke on the phone a little longer, then walked down the corridor that ran alongside all the rooms, climbed the stairs, and his footsteps stopped in the dead woman's bedroom.

Other, heavier footsteps in the hall. There was a knock at the door, which opened immediately. It was the estate manager.

'You asked to see me?'

But he realized that the count wasn't there, looked in bafflement at the three people sitting together, retreated and asked the butler what was going on.

'Some mineral water?' Jean Métayer asked, concerned.

And the lawyer, full of goodwill, cleared his throat:

'We both have very strange professions, inspector ... Have you been with the police for a long time? ... I have been at the bar for nearly fifteen years ... That is to say that I have been involved in the most troubling events you can imagine ... Cheers! ... Your good health, Monsieur Métayer. I'm happy for you about the turn things are taking ...'

The count's voice, in the corridor:

‘Well! You’ll find some! Call your son, who’s playing billiards at the Café de Paris, in Moulins ... He’ll bring whatever you need ...’

The door opened. The count came in.

‘Do you all have something to drink? ... Are there no cigars here?’

And he gave Métayer an inquisitorial look.

‘Cigarettes ... I only smoke ...’

The young man didn’t finish his sentence, but turned his head away, embarrassed.

‘I’ll bring you some.’

‘Gentlemen, please forgive me for the very basic meal that you are about to have ... We’re a long way from the town and ...’

‘Come! Come!’ interrupted the lawyer, who was beginning to show the effects of alcohol. ‘I’m sure it’ll be fine ... Is that a portrait of one of your relatives? ...’

He pointed to the wall of the big drawing room, at the portrait of a man in a stiff frock coat, his neck trapped in a heavy false collar.

‘That’s my father.’

‘So it is! You look like him.’

The maid ushered in Dr Bouchardon, who looked suspiciously around, as if he expected trouble. But Saint-Fiacre welcomed him cheerfully.

‘Come in, doctor ... I expect you know Jean Métayer ... His lawyer ... A charming man, as you will see ... As for the inspector ...’

The two men shook hands, and a few moments later the doctor murmured in Maigret’s ear: ‘What have you been up to here?’

‘Not me ... Him!’

The lawyer, affecting composure, kept walking towards the little round table on which his glass was standing and didn’t notice that he was drinking more than was sensible.

‘How wonderful it is, this old chateau! ... And what a setting it would be for a film! ... That was what I said recently to the state prosecutor in Bourges, who can’t stand the cinema ... People film in all sorts of ...’

He was growing animated and trying to draw someone into conversation.

The count, meanwhile, had approached Métayer and was being unnervingly friendly towards him.

‘What’s saddest about this place is the long winter evenings, isn’t that so? ... *In my day*, I remember that my father too used to invite the doctor and priest ... They weren’t the same as the ones we have today ... But even then the doctor was a non-believer, and discussions always turned to philosophical issues ... And sure enough, here is the ...’

It was the priest, with circles around his eyes, his posture stiff, who didn’t know what to say and hesitated in the doorway.

‘I’m sorry I’m late but ...’

Through the open doors two servants could be seen setting out the cutlery in the dining room.

‘Give Father something to drink ...’

The count was addressing Métayer. Maigret noticed that he himself was not drinking. But the lawyer would soon be drunk. He was explaining to the doctor, who was looking with bafflement at the inspector:

‘A little diplomacy, that’s all! Or, if you prefer, knowledge of the human soul ... They are about the same age, both of good family ... Tell me why they should be glaring at each other like a pair of china dogs? ... Don’t they have common interests? ... The most curious thing ...’

He laughed. He took a swig from his glass.

‘... And to think that it happened by chance, in a café ... So those dear old provincial cafés, where you could be in your own home, have their good side ...’

The sound of an engine had been heard outside. A little later the count went into the dining room, where the estate manager was sitting, and they caught the end of a sentence:

‘Both of them, yes! ... If you like! ... It’s an order! ...’

The ringing of a telephone. The count had rejoined his guests. The butler came into the smoking room.

‘What is it?’

‘The undertaker ... He’s asking what time they can bring the coffin ...’

‘Whenever he likes.’

‘Certainly, Monsieur.’

And the count replied, almost gaily:

‘Would you like to take your seats? ... I’ve had the last bottles brought up from the cellar ... Pass me the first of them, Father ... We’re a bit short of ladies, but ...’

Maigret wanted to hold him back by his sleeve for a moment. The other man looked him in the eyes, with a hint of impatience, pulled abruptly away and went into the dining room.

‘I have invited Monsieur Gautier, our estate manager, and his son, who is a boy with a future ahead of him, to share our meal ...’

Maigret looked at the bank clerk’s hair and, in spite of his unease, couldn’t help smiling. His hair was damp. Before coming into the chateau, the young man had straightened his parting, washed his face and hands and changed his tie.

‘Take your seats, gentlemen!’

And the inspector was certain that Saint-Fiacre’s throat was swollen with a sob. It went unnoticed, because the doctor involuntarily distracted everyone’s attention by picking up a dusty bottle and murmuring:

‘You’ve still got some 1896 Hospice de Beaune? ... I thought the last bottles had been bought by the Larue Restaurant, and that ...’

The rest was lost in the noise of scraping chairs. The priest, hands folded on the tablecloth, head lowered and lips moving, said grace.

Maigret noticed that Saint-Fiacre was staring at him intently.



9. In the Spirit of Walter Scott

The dining room was the room in the chateau that had lost least of its character, thanks to the carved wooden panels that covered the walls all the way up to the ceiling. The room was also higher than it was wide, which made it not only solemn but gloomy, because one felt as if one were eating at the bottom of a well.

On each panel there were two electric lamps, those elongated lamps that imitate candles, complete with fake wax drips.

In the middle of the table, a real seven-branched candelabra with seven real candles.

The Count of Saint-Fiacre and Maigret sat facing one another but could only see each other if they stiffened their backs to look above the flames.

On the right of the count, the priest. On his left, Dr Bouchardon. Chance had placed Jean Métayer at one end of the table, the lawyer at the other. And sitting next to the inspector were the estate manager on one side and Émile Gautier on the other.

From time to time the butler stepped forward into the light to serve the guests, but as soon as he stepped two metres back he was immersed in shadow, and his white-gloved hands were all that could be seen.

‘Don’t you think we could be in a novel by Walter Scott?’

It was the count who spoke, in an indifferent tone, and yet Maigret pricked up his ears, because he had heard an undercurrent, and had a sense that something was about to start.

They were only on their starters. On the table there was a random collection of bottles of white and red wine, claret and burgundy, and everyone was filling his glass as he felt like it.

‘There’s only one detail that doesn’t fit ...’ Maurice de Saint-Fiacre continued. ‘In Walter Scott the poor old woman upstairs would suddenly start screaming ...’

Within a few seconds, everyone stopped chewing, and they felt as if an icy draught has entered the room.

‘By the way, Gautier, has she been left all on her own?’

The estate manager swallowed hastily and stammered:

‘She ... Yes ... There is no one in the countess’s room ...’

‘That can’t be very cheerful!’

At that moment a foot brushed insistently against Maigret’s, but the inspector couldn’t guess who it belonged to. The table was round. Anyone could have reached the middle. And Maigret’s uncertainty was destined to continue, because in the course of the evening the little kicks would become increasingly frequent.

‘Did she receive a lot of people today?’

It was embarrassing to hear him talking about his mother as if she were a living person, and the inspector noted that Jean Métayer was so struck by this that he stopped eating and looked straight ahead, his eyes becoming increasingly sunken.

‘Almost all the local farmers!’ the estate manager’s serious voice replied.

When the butler noticed a hand reaching out towards a bottle he approached in silence. His black arm, ending in a white glove, was seen suddenly emerging from the darkness. The liquid flowed. And it was done in such silence, with such skill, that the lawyer, by now more than tipsy, wonderingly repeated the experiment three or four times.

He delightedly followed this arm which didn’t even brush his shoulder. In the end he could restrain himself no longer.

‘Incredible! You are a marvel, sir, and if I could afford a chateau I would take you on straight away ...’

‘Bah! The chateau will soon be for sale at a bargain price ...’

This time even Maigret frowned as he watched Saint-Fiacre talking like that, in a voice that was curiously indifferent but also rather unnatural. In spite of

everything, there was something strident about his words. Were his nerves on edge? Was it a grim sort of joke?

‘Chicken in half-mourning,’ he announced as the butler brought in some chickens with truffles.

And a moment later, in the same light tone:

‘The murderer will be eating chicken in half-mourning, like everyone else!’

The butler slipped his arm between the guests.

‘But your lordship! ...’

‘Of course! What’s so strange about that? The murderer is among us, of that there is no doubt! But don’t let it take your appetite away, Father! The corpse is in the house too, and that hasn’t taken away your appetite. Albert, a drop of wine for Father!’

Once again the foot brushed Maigret’s ankle; he dropped his napkin and bent to look under the table, but it was too late. When he straightened up again, the count, still eating his chicken, was saying:

‘I mentioned Walter Scott just now, because of the atmosphere that reigns in this room, but also and particularly because of the murderer ... After all, we are at a funeral wake, are we not? ... The funeral will take place tomorrow morning, and in all likelihood we will not be parted before then ... Monsieur Métayer can at least claim to have supplied the bar with excellent whisky ...’

Maigret tried to remember how much Saint-Fiacre had drunk. Less, at any rate, than the doctor, who exclaimed:

‘Excellent! Yes indeed! But my client is also the grandson of wine-growers and ...’

‘I was saying ... What was I saying? ... Oh, yes! ... Fill the priest’s glass, Albert ...’

‘I was saying that since the murderer is here, the others are to some extent acting as upholders of the law ... That’s why our gathering is like a chapter of Walter Scott ...’

‘Let’s be clear that our murderer is in no danger. Isn’t that so, inspector? ... It isn’t a crime to slip a sheet of paper into a missal ...’

‘By the way, doctor ... When did my mother suffer her last attack? ...’

The doctor wiped his lips and looked gloomily around:

‘Three months ago, when you sent a telegram from Berlin to say that you were ill in a hotel room and that ...’

‘I was after some cash! That was it!’

‘I said at the time that any further emotional turmoil would be fatal.’

‘So ... Let’s see ... Who knew? Jean Métayer, of course ... And me, obviously! ... Old Gautier, who’s practically family ... And last of all you and Father here ...’

He gulped down a glass of white wine and pulled a face:

‘So, logically speaking, almost all of us can be seen as potential suspects ... If it amuses you ...’

It was almost as if he were deliberately choosing the most shocking words he could find.

‘... If it amuses you, we will examine each of our individual cases, one at a time ... Let’s start with Father ... Would it have been in his interest to kill my mother? ... You will see that the answer is not as simple as it seems ... I shall leave aside the question of money ...’

The priest was choking, but he didn’t get up from his chair.

‘Father had nothing to gain ... But he is a mystic, an apostle, practically a saint ... He has an eccentric parishioner whose behaviour is causing a scandal ... One moment she’s hurrying to church like the most fervent of believers, the next she’s bringing scandal down upon Saint-Fiacre ... No! Don’t pull that face, Métayer ... We’re all men here ... We are, if you wish, performing a psychological experiment.

‘Father has a faith so ardent that it might drive him to extremes. Remember the days when sinners were purified by being burned at the stake ... So, my mother is at mass ... She has just taken communion. She is in a state of grace. But soon she will succumb to sin once more, and again she will be the subject of a scandal ... If she dies there, in her pew, in a state of holiness ...’

‘But ...’ began the priest, whose eyes were filled with fat tears and who was gripping the table to keep himself calm.

‘Please, Father ... As I said, we are carrying out a psychological experiment ... I just want to show you that even the most austere individuals can be suspected of the worst atrocities. Now, if we move on to the doctor, I find myself more perplexed. He isn’t a saint. And what saves him is that he isn’t a

scientist either. Because if he were, he could have put the piece of paper in the missal to test the resilience of a sickly heart ...’

The clatter of forks had faded away almost to nothing. And the faces were frozen, anxious, almost frantic. There was only the butler filling glasses in silence, with the regularity of a metronome.

‘You are gloomy, gentlemen ... Are there really subjects that one cannot discuss, even among intelligent people?’

‘The next course, please, Albert ... So, let’s leave the doctor aside, since we cannot consider him as a scientist or a researcher. He is saved by his mediocrity.’

He chuckled and turned towards the estate manager.

‘Your turn! ... A more complex case. We are still adopting the viewpoint of a Martian, aren’t we? Two possibilities ... First, you are the model estate manager, the honest man who devotes his life to his masters, to the chateau where he was born ... In fact he wasn’t born here, but no matter ... In that case his position isn’t clear. The Saint-Fiacre family has only a single male heir ... And there is the legacy melting away in front of his nose ... The countess is behaving like a madwoman ... And perhaps the moment has come to save what is left ...

‘A noble gesture, worthy of Walter Scott, and not unlike that of the priest ...

‘But there is also the opposite possibility! You are no longer the model estate manager born at the chateau ... You are a rogue who has for years been taking advantage of and abusing the weakness of your masters ... When we are forced to sell farms, you buy them up on the sly ... And when we are forced to raise mortgages, you are the one who takes them. Don’t get angry, Gautier ... Did the priest get angry? And besides, I haven’t quite finished ...

‘You are almost the real owner of the chateau ...’

‘Your lorship!’

‘Don’t you know how to play the game? We’re playing a game, I repeat! We’re playing, if you like, at being police inspectors like your neighbour. The time has come when the countess has reached the end, when everything will have to be sold, and it will be observed that you are the one who has profited from the situation ... Wouldn’t it be better if the countess happened to die conveniently, thus at the same time sparing herself the need to acquaint herself with poverty? ...’

And, turning towards the butler, a shadow in shadow, a demon with chalk-white hands:

‘Albert! Go and fetch my father’s revolver. If it’s still there ...’

He poured a drink for himself and both his neighbours, then held out the bottle to Maigret.

‘Would you be so kind as to do the honours on your side of the table? Well! Here we are, about halfway through our game ... But let’s wait for Albert. Monsieur Métayer, you’re not drinking ...’

A strangled ‘No, thank you’ was heard.

‘And you, sir?’

And the lawyer, with his mouth full and his tongue coated:

‘No, thank you! No, thank you! I have all that I need. You know that you would make an excellent attorney general?’

He was the only one who laughed, and who ate with indecent appetite, who drank down one glass after another, of burgundy or claret, without even noticing the difference.

The shrill church bell struck ten. Albert handed the count a big revolver, and the count checked to see if it was loaded.

‘Perfect! ... I’ll set it down here, in the middle of the table, which is round ... You will notice, gentlemen, that it is an equal distance from each of you. We have looked at three cases. We will examine three more. Will you let me make a prediction first of all? Well, then! To stay in the tradition and the spirit of Scott, I must tell you that before midnight my mother’s murderer will be dead! ...’

Maigret looked at him keenly across the table and saw that Saint-Fiacre’s eyes were too bright, as if he were drunk. At that very moment a foot again touched his.

‘And now I shall go on – but do eat your salads. I am moving on to your neighbour on your left, inspector, to Émile Gautier ... A serious boy, a hard worker who, as one says at prize-giving, has advanced entirely by merit and by stubborn hard work ...’

‘Could he have killed?’

‘One initial hypothesis: he worked for his father, and in agreement with him.’

‘He goes to Moulins every day. He better than anyone else knows the family’s financial state ... He has every opportunity to see a printer or a typographer ...

‘Let us move on! Second hypothesis ... You will forgive me, Métayer, for telling you, if you didn’t know it already, that you have a rival. Émile Gautier is certainly no beauty. But he still filled the position that you filled so tactfully, before you did ...

‘Some years ago. Did he have certain hopes? Has he, since then, succeeded in stirring my mother’s over-sensitive heart?

‘Be that as it may, he was her official protégé and he was allowed to nurture all kinds of ambitions ...

‘Then you came ... You conquered ...

‘Killing the countess while at the same time casting suspicion on yourself ...’

Maigret’s toes were uncomfortable in his shoes. It was all hateful, sacrilegious! Saint-Fiacre was speaking with the elation of a drunkard. And the others were wondering whether they would make it to the end, whether they should stay and endure this scene or get up and leave.

‘You will realize that we are completely adrift on a sea of the imagination. Please note that even if the countess up there could speak, she could not give us the key to the mystery. The murderer alone knows how his crime was committed. Eat, Émile Gautier ... Whatever you do, don’t get upset like your father, who looks as if he is about to be sick ...

‘Albert! ... There must be some bottles of wine left in a rack somewhere ...

‘Your turn, young man!’

And he turned with a smile towards Métayer, who leaped to his feet.

‘My lawyer will be—’

‘Sit down, for heaven’s sake! And don’t try to tell us that you can’t take a joke at your age ...’

Maigret looked at him as he uttered those words and he noted that the count’s forehead was covered with big droplets of sweat.

‘None of us is trying to look better than we are, isn’t that so? Well, then! I see that you are trying to understand. Take a fruit! They’re excellent for the digestion ...’

The heat was unbearable, and Maigret wondered who had turned the electric lights out, leaving only the candles on the table lit.

‘Your case is so simple as to be entirely without interest ... You were playing a disagreeable part, and one that you would not play for long ... In the end you were mentioned in the will ... A will, however, that could be changed at any moment ... A sudden death and it would all be over! ... You would pick the fruit of your ... of your sacrifice ... And, no doubt, you would marry a local girl whom you had had your eye on ...’

‘I beg your pardon!’ the lawyer broke in, so comically that Maigret couldn’t suppress a smile.

‘Shut your mouth, you! Drink!’

Saint-Fiacre was adamant! He was drunk, there was no longer any doubt about it! He had that eloquence that drunks so often have, a mixture of roughness and refinement, of clear diction and slyly evasive words.

‘Which leaves only me!’

He called for Albert.

‘Listen, old man, go upstairs ... It must be gloomy for my mother, being left all on her own ...’

Maigret saw the servant’s quizzical eye settling on the estate manager, who blinked assent.

‘One moment! First put some bottles on the table ... Whisky too ... I shouldn’t imagine anyone is concerned with protocol ...’

He consulted his watch.

‘Ten past eleven ... I have been talking so much that I didn’t hear the bells of your church, Father ...’

And, as the butler nudged the revolver slightly as he put the whisky bottles down on the table, the count intervened.

‘Careful, Albert! ... It must be an equal distance from each of them ...’

He waited for the door to close again.

‘And there we are!’ he concluded. ‘That leaves only me! I won’t be telling you anything you don’t know if I say that I have never done anything good! Except perhaps while my father was alive ... But since I was only seventeen when he died ...’

‘I’m broke! Everyone knows that! The little weekly newspapers mention it in barely concealed terms ...’

‘Dud cheques ... I scrounge money from my mother as often as I possibly can ... I invented that illness in Berlin to get hold of a few thousand francs ...

‘Bear in mind that that is the same as the missal trick, although on a smaller scale ...

‘And yet, what happens? The money that is my due is spent by little bastards like Métayer ... I’m sorry, old man ... We’re still doing transcendental psychology ...

‘Soon there will be nothing left ... I call my mother, when a dud cheque could mean jail for me ... She refuses to pay ... There are witnesses to back that one up ...

‘So, if it goes on, in a few weeks there will be nothing left of my inheritance ...

‘Two hypotheses, as for Émile Gautier. The first ...’

Never in his career had Maigret felt so uneasy. And it was probably the first time that he had a very clear sense that he was not a match for the situation. Events were out of his control. Sometimes he thought he was starting to understand, and a moment later a phrase from Saint-Fiacre called everything into question again!

And there was still that insistent foot pressing against his own.

‘Why don’t we talk about something else!’ the intoxicated lawyer exclaimed.

‘Gentlemen ...’ the priest began.

‘Excuse me! You owe me your time until midnight at least! I was saying that the first hypothesis ...

‘Oh, marvellous! You’ve made me lose my thread ...’

And as if to find it again, he poured himself a full glass of whisky.

‘I know that my mother is very sensitive. I slip the piece of paper into her missal, to frighten her and, in the process, move her to pity, planning to come back the next day to ask her for the necessary funds, and hope to find her more accommodating ...

‘But then you have the second hypothesis! Why wouldn’t I want to kill too?

‘Not all the money of the Saint-Fiacre family has been used up. There’s a bit left. And, in my situation, a bit of money, however little, could be my salvation!

‘I am vaguely aware that Métayer is mentioned in the will. But a murderer cannot inherit ...

‘Wouldn’t he be suspected of the crime? He who spends part of his time in a printing works in Moulins! He who, living in the chateau, could slip the piece of paper in the missal as and when he wanted to?’

‘Did I not arrive in Moulins in the afternoon? And didn’t I wait down there, with my mistress, to see the result of this manoeuvre? ...’

He got to his feet, with his glass in his hand.

‘Your health, gentlemen ... You are gloomy ... I am sorry to see that ... My mother’s whole life was gloomy during those last years ... Isn’t that so, Father? ... It’s only right that her last night should be accompanied by a little gaiety ...’

He looked the inspector in the eye:

‘Your health, Monsieur Maigret!’

Who was he making fun of? Of him? Of everyone?

Maigret felt he was in the presence of an irresistible force. Some individuals, at a given point in their lives, experience a moment of plenitude, a moment in which they are somehow elevated above the rest of humanity and themselves.

Sometimes, like a gambler in Monte Carlo, who one evening keeps winning, whatever he does. It is true of the opposition MP, unknown until that moment, whose speech shakes and topples the government, and who is more surprised than anyone, because all he wanted was a few lines in the parliamentary gazette.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was experiencing his moment. He was filled with a strength that he hadn’t suspected himself of having, and the others could only lower their heads.

But wasn’t it drunkenness that was sweeping him along like that?

‘Let’s return to the start of our discussion, gentlemen, since it isn’t yet midnight ... I said that my mother’s murderer was among us ... I have proved that it could be me or one of you, except perhaps the inspector and the doctor!’

‘I’m still not sure ...’

‘And I prophesied his death ...’

‘Will you let me continue with my hypothetical game? He knows that the law can do nothing about him. But he also knows that there are several of us, or rather that there will be several people left, six at least, who know his crime ...’

‘There again, we are confronted with several solutions ...’

‘The first is the most Romantic, the most in tune with Walter Scott ...’

‘But I have to introduce a new parenthesis ... What characterizes this crime? ... It’s the fact that there are at least five individuals who gravitated around the countess ... Five individuals who stood to gain from her death and who might, each in his own way, have thought of how to bring it about ...

‘Only one of them dared to do it ... Only one committed the crime! ...

‘And yet I wouldn’t be surprised if he took advantage of this evening to avenge himself on the others ... He is lost! ... Why not blow up the lot of us? ...’

And Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, with a disarming smile, looked at each of them in turn.

‘Is it exciting enough? The old dining room in the old chateau, the candles, the table covered with bottles ... Then, at midnight, death ... You will note that the scandal will be suppressed at the same time ... Tomorrow people will come running, and won’t understand a thing ... They will put it down to accident, or an anarchist attack ...’

The lawyer fidgeted in his chair and glanced anxiously around, towards the gloom that had fallen less than a metre from the table.

‘If I might remind you that I am a doctor,’ murmured Bouchardon, ‘I would advise each of you to have a good strong cup of black coffee ...’

‘And I,’ the priest said slowly, ‘would remind you that there is a dead person in the house ...’

Saint-Fiacre hesitated for a second. A foot brushed Maigret’s ankle, and he quickly bent down, too late once again.

‘I asked you to wait until midnight ... I have examined only the first hypothesis ... There is a second ... The murderer, crazed and cornered, fires a bullet into his head ... *But I don’t believe he’ll do it ...*’

‘I request that we move to the smoking room!’ the lawyer squealed, getting to his feet and clinging to the back of his chair to keep from falling.

‘And last of all there is a third hypothesis ... Someone who cares about the honour of the family comes to the murderer’s assistance ... Wait ... The question is more complex ... Shouldn’t scandal be avoided? ... Shouldn’t the guilty man be *helped* to kill himself? ...

‘The revolver is there, gentlemen, an equal distance from all our hands ... It is ten to midnight ... I say again that at midnight the murderer will die ...’

And this time his voice was so firm that everyone remained silent. No one breathed.

‘The victim is up there, with a servant sitting vigil ... The murderer is here, surrounded by seven people ...’

Saint-Fiacre drained his glass in one go. And the anonymous foot was still brushing Maigret’s.

‘Six minutes to midnight ... Is that enough, Walter Scott? ... Tremble, murderer ...’

He was drunk! And he was still drinking!

‘At least five people to steal from an old woman deprived of her husband, of affection ... Only one who dared ... It will be bomb or revolver, gentlemen ... The bomb, which will blow all of us up, or the revolver, which will hit only the guilty man ... Four minutes to midnight ...’

And, brusquely:

‘Don’t forget that no one knows! ...’

He grabbed the bottle of whisky and served everyone, starting with Maigret’s glass and finishing with Émile Gautier’s.

He didn’t fill his own. Hadn’t he drunk enough? A candle went out. The others would follow.

‘I said midnight ... Three minutes to midnight ...’

He was affecting the airs of an auctioneer.

‘Three minutes to midnight ... two minutes ... The murderer is about to die ... You can begin a prayer, Father ... And you, doctor, do you at least have your medical bag? ... Two minutes ... One and a half ...’

And still that insistent foot against Maigret’s. He didn’t dare to bend down, for fear of missing another spectacle.

‘I’m off!’ shouted the lawyer, rising to his feet.

All eyes turned towards him. He was standing up. He gripped the back of his chair. He hesitated to take the three dangerous steps that would lead him to the door. He hiccupped.

And at that moment there was a great bang. Everyone was motionless for a second, maybe two.

A second candle went out, and at the same time Maurice de Saint-Fiacre toppled over, his shoulders struck the back of the gothic chair, he tilted to the

left, lurched back to the right, but then fell back inertly, his head resting on the priest's arm.



10. The Wake

What followed was mayhem. Things were happening all over the place, and afterwards each of them could only have related a small part of the events that they had witnessed in person.

The dining room was now lit by only five candles. Huge areas were still in darkness, and agitated people came and went as if from the wings of a stage.

The gun had been fired by one of Maigret's neighbours: Émile Gautier. And as soon as the shot had gone off, he held out both wrists to the inspector in a slightly theatrical gesture.

Maigret was on his feet. Gautier stood up. So did his father, and all three formed a group on one side of the table, while another group gathered around the victim.

The Count of Saint-Fiacre's forehead still rested against the priest's arm. The doctor, leaning forwards, looked grimly around.

'Dead? ...' asked the podgy lawyer.

No reply. The scene on that side of the table was sluggish, as if being played out by bad actors.

Only Jean Métayer belonged to neither one group nor the other. He had stayed beside his chair, anxious, shivering, not knowing where to look.

In the minutes leading up to his action, Émile Gautier had plainly prepared his demeanour, because as soon as he had set the gun back down on the table he literally made a declaration, looking Maigret in the eyes.

'He was the one who said it was going to happen, wasn't he? ... The murderer had to die ... And, because he was too much of a coward to take the law into his

own hands ...’

His self-confidence was extraordinary.

‘I did what I saw as my duty ...’

Could the others hear him from the other side of the table? There were footsteps in the corridor. It was the servants. The doctor went to the door to stop them from coming in. Maigret didn’t hear what he said to get rid of them.

‘I saw Saint-Fiacre prowling around the chateau on the night of the crime ... That was how I worked out ...’

The whole scene was badly directed. And Gautier was hamming it up to the rafters when he announced:

‘The judges will decide whether ...’

The doctor spoke.

‘Are you sure it was Saint-Fiacre who killed his mother?’

‘Absolutely certain! Would I have acted as I did if ...’

‘So you saw him prowling around the chateau the night before the crime?’

‘I saw him as I see you now. He had left his car on the edge of the village ...’

‘You have no other proof?’

‘I do, in fact! This afternoon, the altar boy came to see me at the bank, with his mother ... It was his mother who made him speak ... Shortly after the crime, the count asked the child to give him the missal and promised him a sum of money ...’

Maigret was running out of patience and felt as if he had been left out of the play.

And yes, it was a play! Why else was the doctor smirking into his beard? And why was the priest gently pushing Saint-Fiacre’s head away?

A play, moreover, that was being performed simultaneously as farce and drama.

For the Count of Saint-Fiacre rose to his feet like a man who had just been enjoying a snooze. His face was hard, with an ironic but threatening wrinkle in the corners of his lips.

‘Come over here and say that again! ...’ he said.

And an unearthly cry rang out, as Émile Gautier screamed in fear and gripped Maigret’s arm for protection. But the inspector stepped back, leaving the field open to the two men.

There was someone who didn't understand: Jean Métayer. And he was almost as frightened as the bank clerk. To top it all, one of the candlesticks was knocked over, and the tablecloth caught fire, spreading a smell of burning.

It was the lawyer who doused the incipient flames with the contents of a bottle of wine.

'Come here!'

It was an order! And the tone was such that disobedience was clearly out of the question.

Maigret had picked up the revolver. A glance was enough to show him that it was loaded with blanks.

He guessed the rest. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre letting his head rest on the priest's arm ... A few whispered words to make his death seem believable for a moment ...

Now he wasn't the same man. He looked bigger, more solid. He didn't take his eyes off young Gautier, and it was the estate manager who suddenly ran towards a window, opened it and shouted to his son:

'Over here ...'

It was a good idea. Emotions were so heightened, and there was such confusion, that Gautier had a chance to get away at that moment.

Did the little lawyer do it on purpose? Probably not! Or else his drunkenness filled him with a kind of heroism. As the fleeing man made for the window, he stuck out his leg, and Gautier fell head first.

He didn't get to his feet unaided. A hand had grabbed him by the neck, lifted him up and set him on his feet, and he yelled again as he realized that it was Saint-Fiacre who was forcing him to stand upright.

'Don't move! ... Someone shut the window ...'

Saint-Fiacre started with a punch in the face of the young bank clerk, which turned purple. He did it quite coldly.

'Speak, now! Tell me ...'

No one intervened. It didn't even occur to anyone, since they all felt that only one man had the right to raise his voice.

Only the boy's father murmured in Maigret's ear: 'Are you going to let him get away with that?'

He certainly was! Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was master of the situation, and he was up to the task.

‘You saw me on the night in question, it’s true!’

Then, to the others:

‘You know where? ... On the lawn ... I was about to go in ... He was coming out ... I wanted to pick up some family jewels to sell them on ... We found ourselves face to face, in the night ... He was shivering ... And this scoundrel told me he was coming from ... Can you guess? From my mother’s bedroom, that’s right! ...’

Then in a low voice, casually:

‘I abandoned my plan. I went back to Moulins.’

Jean Métayer’s eyes widened. The lawyer stroked his chin to maintain his composure and peered at his glass, which he didn’t dare to pick up.

‘It wasn’t proof enough ... Because there were two of them in the house, and Gautier might have been telling the truth ... As I told you a moment ago, he was the first to take advantage of an old woman’s confusion ... Métayer only turned up later ... Had Métayer, feeling that his position was under threat, not tried to take revenge? ... I wanted to know ... They were both suspicious of each other ... It was almost as if they were challenging me ...’

‘Isn’t that right, Gautier? ... The gentleman with the dud cheques who prowls around the chateau at night and wouldn’t dare accuse anyone for fear of being arrested himself ...’

And, in another voice: ‘You will excuse me, Father, and you too, doctor, for making you witness such a foul spectacle ... But we’ve said it already: true justice, the justice of the courts, has no business here ... Isn’t that so, Monsieur Maigret? ... Did you at least work out that I was the one kicking you a few moments ago? ...’

He paced back and forth, leaving the light for the shadow and then the shadow for the light. He gave the impression of a man containing himself, who can remain calm only at the cost of a terrible effort.

Sometimes he came so close to Gautier that he could have touched him.

‘How tempting it was to pick up the revolver and fire! Yes! I had said it myself: the guilty man would die at midnight! And you became the defender of the honour of the Saint-Fiacre family.’

This time his fist struck the young man so hard, right in the middle of the face, that blood spurted from his nose.

Émile Gautier had the eyes of a dying animal. He staggered under the blow and was on the point of bursting into tears of pain, of fear, of confusion.

The lawyer tried to intervene, but Saint-Fiacre pushed him away.

‘I beg your pardon, monsieur!’

And his formality marked the distance that lay between them. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was firmly in charge.

‘You will forgive me, gentlemen, but I have only one small formality to carry out.’

He opened the door wide and turned towards Gautier.

‘Come with me! ...’

The young man’s feet were riveted to the ground. The corridor was unlit. He didn’t want to be alone there with his adversary.

It didn’t take long. Saint-Fiacre walked over to him and hit him again, sending Gautier tumbling into the hall.

‘Up you go!’

And he pointed to the stairs leading to the first floor.

‘Inspector! I should warn you that ...’ the estate manager panted.

The priest had averted his head. He was suffering, but didn’t have the strength to intervene. Everyone was exhausted, and Métayer poured himself a drink, anything at all, his throat was so dry.

‘Where are they going?’ the lawyer asked.

They could be heard walking along the corridor, whose tiles rang out under their footsteps. And Gautier’s heavy breathing could be heard as well.

‘You knew everything!’ Maigret said to the estate manager slowly, in a very low voice. ‘You agreed, you and your son! You already had the farms, the mortgages ... But Jean Métayer was still dangerous ... Getting the countess out of the way ... And at the same time getting rid of the gigolo who was under suspicion ...’

A cry of pain. The doctor went into the corridor to see what was happening.

‘Nothing!’ he said. ‘That rogue doesn’t want to go upstairs, so he’s being helped along ...’

‘It’s revolting! ... It’s a crime! ... What’s he going to do? ...’ cried the young man’s father, dashing to the door.

Maigret followed him, along with the doctor. They reached the bottom of the stairs just as the two others got to the door of the room where the body was laid out.

And Saint-Fiacre’s voice was heard:

‘Go in!’

‘I can’t ... I ...’

‘Go in!’

A dull thud. Another punch.

Old Gautier ran up the stairs, followed by Maigret and Bouchardon. All three of them reached the top just as the door closed again, and no one moved.

At first not a sound came from behind the heavy oak door. Gautier held his breath and pulled a face in the darkness.

A simple ray of light, under the door.

‘On your knees!’

A pause. Hoarse breathing.

‘Faster! ... On your knees! ... And now, ask forgiveness! ...’

Another very long silence. A cry of pain. This time it was not a punch that the murderer was dealt, but a kick right in the face.

‘Sor ... sorry ...’

‘Is that all? ... Is that all you can find to say? ... Remember that she was the one who paid for your studies ...’

‘Sorry!’

‘Remember that she was still alive three days ago.’

‘Sorry!’

‘Remember, you utter little scoundrel, that you used to climb into her bed ...’

‘Sorry! ... Sorry! ...’

‘Better than that! ... Come on, then! ... Tell her you’re a wretched insect ... Repeat ...’

‘I am ...’

‘On your knees, I said! ... Do you need a rug?’

‘Ow! ... I ...’

‘Plead for forgiveness ...’

And suddenly these replies, separated by long silences, were followed by a series of loud noises. Saint-Fiacre could contain himself no longer. There were a number of thuds against the parquet floor.

Maigret opened the door a chink. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was holding the back of Gautier's neck and banging his head against the floor.

At the sight of the inspector he let go, dabbed his forehead and stood up to his full height.

'It's done! ...' he panted.

He noticed the estate manager and frowned.

'Don't you feel the need to plead for forgiveness as well?'

And the old man was so frightened that he fell to his knees.

In the faint light from the two candles, all that could be seen of the dead woman was her nose, which looked larger than usual, and her joined hands, clutching a rosary.

'Get out!'

The count pushed Émile Gautier outside and closed the door. And the group went back downstairs.

Émile Gautier was bleeding. He couldn't find his handkerchief. The doctor passed him his own.

For it was a horrible sight: a tormented, bloodstained face; a nose that was little more than a tumour, the upper lip split.

And yet the ugliest, the most odious thing about it was the eyes, with their evasive gaze.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, standing very straight like a master of the house who knows what he has to do, strode across the long ground-floor corridor and opened the door, receiving a gust of icy air.

'Clear off! ...' he growled, turning towards the father and the son.

But just as Émile was leaving, he instinctively grabbed him.

Maigret was sure that he heard a sob issuing from the count's throat. He struck out again, convulsively, and shouted:

'Scoundrel! ... Scoundrel! ...'

The inspector had only to touch his shoulder. Saint-Fiacre regained control of himself, literally threw the body down the steps and closed the door.

Not so fast that they couldn't hear the old man's voice:

‘Émile ... Where are you? ...’

The priest was praying, elbows on the sideboard. In a corner, Métayer and his lawyer stood motionless, their eyes fixed on the door.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre came in, head held high.

‘Gentlemen ...’ he began.

But he couldn’t speak, choked as he was by emotion. He was utterly exhausted.

He shook the doctor’s hand, and Maigret’s, as if to indicate that it was time for them to leave. Then, turning towards Métayer and his companion, he waited.

The two men seemed not to understand. Or else they were paralysed by terror.

To show them the way he nodded his head and snapped his fingers.

Nothing else!

But in fact there was something! The lawyer looked for his hat, and Saint-Fiacre groaned:

‘Faster! ...’

Behind a door, Maigret heard a murmur, and he guessed that it must be the servants, trying to guess what was happening in the chateau.

He put on his heavy overcoat. He felt the need to shake Saint-Fiacre’s hand once more.

The door was open. Outside, the night was clear, cold and cloudless. The poplars stood out against a sky bathed in moonlight. Footsteps echoed somewhere far away, and there was light in the windows of the estate manager’s house.

‘No, Father, you can stay ...’

And Maurice de Saint-Fiacre’s voice continued in the echoing corridor:

‘Now, if you aren’t too tired, let us go and sit vigil for my mother ...’



11. The Two-Note Whistle

‘Please don’t think ill of me for paying you so little attention, Monsieur Maigret ... But with the funeral and everything ...’

And poor Marie Tatin busied herself, getting whole cases of bottles of beer and lemonade ready.

‘Especially when people who have come a long way are going to want their lunch ...’

All the fields were white with frost, and the blades of grass broke under their feet. Every quarter of an hour the bells of the little church sounded the death knell.

The hearse had arrived at dawn, and the undertakers had settled themselves at the inn, in a semi-circle around the fireplace.

‘I’m surprised the estate manager isn’t at home!’ Marie Tatin had said to them. ‘He must be at the chateau, with Monsieur Maurice ...’

And already the first villagers were arriving in their Sunday best.

Maigret was finishing his breakfast when he looked out the window and saw the altar boy arriving, his mother holding him by the hand. But his mother didn’t walk him all the way to the inn. She stopped on the corner, where she thought no one could see her, and pushed her son on ahead, as if to give him the necessary propulsion to reach Marie Tatin’s inn.

When Ernest stepped inside, he looked very confident. As confident as a child at a prize-giving ceremony, reciting a poem he has been rehearsing for three months.

‘Is the inspector here?’

Just as he was asking Marie Tatin that question, he spotted Maigret and walked towards him, both hands in his pockets, one of them fiddling with something.

‘I came to ...’

‘Show me your whistle.’

Ernest immediately stepped back, looked away and muttered, ‘What whistle?’

‘The one you’ve got in your pocket ... Have you wanted a boy-scout whistle for a long time? ...’

The boy took it mechanically from his pocket and set it down on the table.

‘And now tell me your little story.’

A suspicious glance, then a faint shrug. Because Ernest was already crafty. His eyes clearly said: ‘Too bad! I’ve got the whistle! I’m going to tell you what I was ordered to say ...’

And he recited:

‘It’s about the missal ... I didn’t tell you everything the other day because you scared me ... But Mum wants me to tell the truth ... They came and asked me for the missal just before high mass ...’

But he was red in the face and suddenly picked the whistle up as if he was afraid of seeing it confiscated because of his lie.

‘And who came to find you?’

‘Monsieur Métayer ... The secretary at the chateau ...’

‘Come and sit next to me ... Would you like some grenadine?’

‘Yes ... With fizzy water ...’

‘A grenadine with sparkling mineral water, please, Marie ... And are you happy with your whistle? ... Make it work ...’

The undertakers turned round at the sound of the whistle.

‘Your mother bought it for you, yesterday afternoon, isn’t that right?’

‘How do you know?’

‘How much did they give your mother at the bank yesterday?’

The little boy looked him in the eye. He wasn’t blushing any more, he was quite pale now. He glanced at the door to measure how far away from it he was.

‘Drink your grenadine ... So it was Émile Gautier who saw you ... He made you repeat your lesson ...’

‘Yes!’

‘He told you to accuse Jean Métayer?’

‘Yes.’

And, after a moment’s reflection:

‘What are you going to do to me?’

Maigret forgot to reply. He was thinking. He was thinking that his role in this matter had consisted solely in supplying the last link, a tiny link that perfectly completed the circle.

It was Jean Métayer that Gautier had wanted to incriminate. But the previous evening’s events had scuppered his plans. He had worked out that the dangerous man was not the secretary, but the Count of Saint-Fiacre.

If everything had gone according to plan, he would have had to visit the little boy early in the morning to teach him a new lesson.

You will say that it was the count who asked you for the missal ...

And now the boy repeated again:

‘What are you going to do to me?’

Maigret didn’t have time to reply. The lawyer came downstairs and into the dining room, approached Maigret with his hand outstretched, with a hint of hesitation.

‘Did you sleep well, inspector? ... Excuse me ... I want to ask your advice, on behalf of my client ... I have the most appalling headache ...’

He sat down, or rather slumped, on the bench.

‘The funeral’s fixed for ten o’clock ...’

He looked at the undertakers, then at the people passing in the road, waiting for the funeral to begin.

‘Between ourselves, do you believe that it’s Métayer’s duty to ... Don’t get me wrong ... We understand the situation, and it’s purely out of delicacy that ...’

‘Please can I go now?’

Maigret didn’t hear the boy. He was addressing the lawyer.

‘Haven’t you worked it out yet?’

‘Meaning that if we examine ...’

‘A piece of advice: don’t examine anything at all!’

‘So in your view we’d be better off leaving without? ...’

Too late! Ernest, who had grabbed his whistle, was opening the door and making off as fast as his legs would carry him.

‘Legally we’re all in an excel—’

‘An excellent situation, yes!’

‘Isn’t that so? ... It’s what I was just saying to ...’

‘Did he sleep well?’

‘He didn’t even take his clothes off ... He’s a very nervous boy, very sensitive, like lots of people of good family and ...’

But the undertakers pricked up their ears, got to their feet and paid for their drinks. Maigret got up too, unhooked his overcoat with the velvet collar and wiped his bowler hat with his sleeve.

‘You both have a chance to slip away during ...’

‘During the funeral? ... In that case, I’ll have to phone for a taxi.’

‘That’s right.’

The priest in his surplice. Ernest and two other altar boys in their black robes. The cross carried by a priest from a neighbouring village, walking quickly because of the cold. And the liturgical chants that they delivered as they ran along the road.

The villagers were grouped at the foot of the steps. It was impossible to see inside. At last the door opened, and the coffin appeared, carried by four men.

Behind them, a tall silhouette. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, standing very straight, his eyes red.

He wasn’t wearing black. He was the only one not in mourning.

And yet, when his eye drifted across the crowd from the top of the steps, there was a moment’s awkwardness.

As he came out of the chateau there was no one beside him. And he followed the coffin all by himself ...

From his vantage point, Maigret noticed the estate manager’s house, which had been his, its doors and windows closed.

The shutters of the chateau were closed as well. It was only in the kitchen that servants pressed their faces to the windows.

A murmur of sacred chants, almost drowned by the sound of footsteps on the gravel.

Bells pealing out.

Two pairs of eyes met: the count’s and Maigret’s.

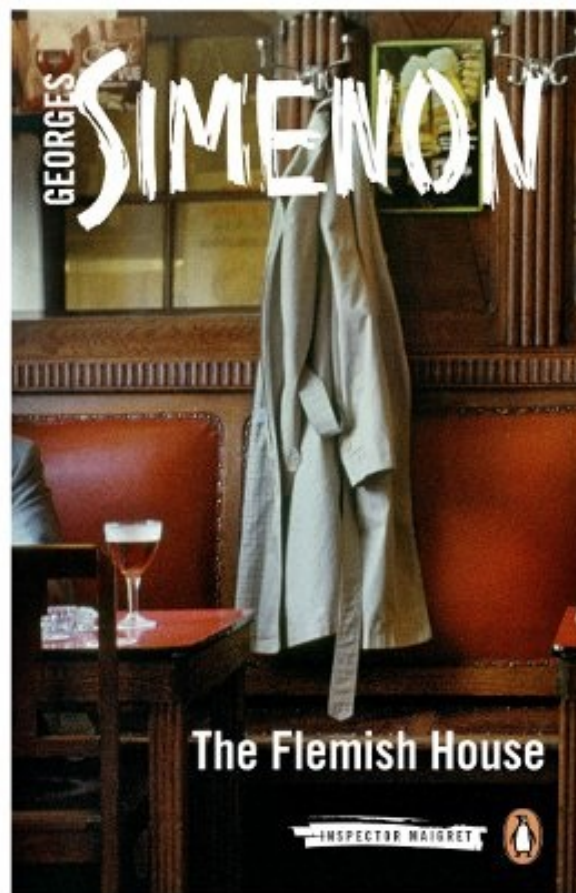
Was the inspector mistaken? It seemed to him that the shadow of a smile hovered on Maurice de Saint-Fiacre's lips. Not the smile of a sceptical Parisian, or the smile of a ruined family.

A serene, confident smile ...

During mass, everyone could hear the blaring horn of a taxi: a little scoundrel fleeing with a lawyer whose brain was dulled by a hangover.



**READ ON FOR AN EXTRACT FROM THE
NEXT INSPECTOR MAIGRET NOVEL**



**INSPECTOR
MAIGRET**

1. Anna Peeters

When Maigret got off the train at Givet station the first person he saw, right opposite his compartment, was Anna Peeters.

It was as if she had predicted that he would stop at this precise spot on the platform! She didn't seem either surprised or proud of the fact. She was just as he had seen her in Paris, as she must always have been, dressed in a gunmetal suit and black shoes, wearing a hat whose shape or even colour it was impossible to remember afterwards.

Here, in the wind that swept the platform, where only a few passengers were now walking, she looked taller, a little stouter. Her nose was red, and she was holding a handkerchief rolled up in a ball.

'I was sure you would come, inspector ...'

Was she sure of herself, or sure of him? She didn't smile as she greeted him. She was already asking him questions:

'Do you have any other luggage?'

No! Maigret had only his bellows case, in coarse mellowed leather, and he carried it himself, in spite of its weight.

The only people to leave the train were third-class passengers, who had already disappeared. The girl held out her platform ticket to the ticket collector, who looked at her insistently.

Outside, she went on without fuss:

'At first I thought of getting a room ready for you at home. Then I thought it through. In the end I imagine it's better for you to stay at a hotel. So I've booked the best room at the Hôtel de la Meuse.'

They had walked barely a hundred metres along the little streets of Givet, and already everyone was turning to look at them. Maigret walked heavily, dragging his suitcase along at his side. He tried to notice everything: the people, the houses, and particularly his companion.

‘What’s that noise?’ he asked her, hearing a sound that he couldn’t identify.

‘The Meuse in spate, slapping against the piers of the bridge. Boat transport has been suspended for three weeks now.’

Emerging from a sidestreet, they suddenly came upon the river. It was broad. Its banks were indistinct. In places the brown waters spread into the meadows. Elsewhere, a boathouse emerged from the water.

It held at least a hundred barges, tugs and dredgers, pressed tightly against one another, forming a huge block.

‘Here’s your hotel. It isn’t very cosy. Do you want to stop and take a bath?’

It was baffling! Maigret couldn’t define the sensation that he felt. Never, he was sure, had a woman ever aroused his curiosity as much as this one; she stayed calm and unsmiling, made no attempt to look pretty and sometimes dabbed her nose with her handkerchief.

She must have been between twenty-five and thirty. A lot taller than the average, she was solidly built, with a bone structure that stripped her features of all grace.

The clothes of a lower-middle-class woman, extremely sober. A calm, almost distinguished reserve.

She treated him like a guest. She was at home. She thought of everything.

‘I have no reason to take a bath.’

‘In that case, will you come straight to the house? Give your suitcase to the porter. Porter! Take this suitcase to room 3. The gentleman will be back shortly.’

And Maigret thought, as he looked at her from the corner of his eye: ‘I must look like an idiot!’

For there was nothing of the little boy about him. Even though she wasn’t exactly frail, he was twice as wide as she was, and his big overcoat made him look as if he was carved from stone.

‘Aren’t you tired?’

‘Not at all!’

‘In that case, I can already tell you the first few bits of information on the way ...’

She had already given him the first bits of information in Paris! One fine day when he got to his office, he had found this strange woman who had been

waiting for him for two or three hours, and whom the office boy had been unable to send away.

‘It’s personal!’ she had announced as he questioned her in front of two police inspectors.

And once they were alone she had handed him a letter. Maigret had recognized the handwriting of one of his wife’s cousins, who lived in Nancy.

My dear Maigret,

Miss Anna Peeters has been recommended to me by my brother-in-law, who has known her for about ten years. She is a very responsible young woman, who will tell you of her misfortunes herself. Do what you can for her ...

‘Do you live in Nancy?’

‘No, in Givet!’

‘But the letter ...’

‘I went to Nancy on purpose, before coming to Paris. I knew my cousin knew someone important in the police force ...’

She wasn’t an ordinary suppliant. She didn’t lower her eyes. There was nothing humble about her bearing. She spoke frankly, looking straight ahead, as if to claim what was rightfully hers.

‘If you don’t agree to look at our case, my parents and I will be lost, and it will be the most hateful miscarriage of justice ...’

Maigret had taken some notes to sum up her account of things. Quite a muddled family history.

The Peeters family, who owned a grocer’s shop on the Belgian border ... Three children: Anna, who helped them with the business, Maria, who was a teacher, and Joseph, a law student in Nancy ...

Joseph had had a child by a young local girl ... The child was three years old ... But the girl had suddenly disappeared, and the Peeters family were accused of killing or kidnapping her.

Maigret didn’t have to get involved in any of that. A colleague in Nancy was on the case. He had sent him a telegram, and received his categorical reply:

Peeters family v guilty. Stop. Arrest imminent.

That had made his mind up. He arrived in Givet without a mission, without an official title. And, from the station he fell under the wing of Anna, whom he never grew tired of observing.

The current was violent. The flood formed noisy cascades by each pier of the bridge, and dragged whole trees along.

The wind, which swept through the Meuse valley, blew against the direction of the river, lifting the water to unexpected heights and creating real waves.

It was three in the afternoon. The first hints of night falling.

There were gusts of wind in the almost deserted streets. The few passersby walked quickly, and Anna wasn't the only one blowing her nose.

'See this alleyway on the left ...'

Anna paused discreetly for a moment, pointing almost imperceptibly at the second house in the sidestreet. A poor-looking, single-storey house. There was already a light on – a paraffin lamp – at one window.

'That's where she lives!'

'Who?'

'Her! Germaine Piedboeuf ... The girl who ...'

'The one your brother had a child with?'

'If the child is his! It hasn't even been proved. Look!'

In a doorway a couple could be seen: a hatless girl, probably a little factory worker, and the back of a man who was hugging her.

'Is that her?'

'No, because she's disappeared ... But she's the same kind of girl ... You understand? She made my brother believe ...'

'Doesn't the child look like him?'

She replied crisply:

'He looks like his mother. Come on! These people are always watching from behind their curtains ...'

'Does she have a family?'

'Her father, who is a night watchman at the factory, and her brother Gérard ...'

The little house, and particularly the window lit by the paraffin lamp, were now etched in the inspector's memory.

'Do you know Givet?'

'I once passed through without stopping.'

An endless quay, very wide, with mooring posts every twenty metres for the barges. Some warehouses. A low building with a flag flying on it.

‘French customs ... Our house is further away, near Belgian customs ...’

The water was lapping so furiously that the barges were bumping against one another. Untethered horses were grazing the sparse grass.

‘You see that light? That’s where we live.’

A customs officer watched them passing without a word. In a group of sailors, someone started speaking Flemish.

‘What are they saying?’

She hesitated to reply, and averted her head for the first time.

‘That we’ll never know the truth!’

And she walked more quickly, against the wind, her back bent to offer less resistance to the wind.

Now they were outside the town. This was the realm of the river, of boats, of customs, of charterers. Here and there an electric light was lit, in the middle of the wind. On a barge, washing flapping on a line. Children playing in the mud.

‘Your colleague came to our house again and told us on behalf of the examining magistrate that we were to place ourselves at the disposal of the forces of law and order ... It’s the fourth time everything has been searched, even the water-tank ...’

They were almost there. The Flemish house was becoming more clearly visible. It was a building of a considerable size, beside the river, in the place where the boats were most concentrated. There was no other house nearby. The only building in sight, a hundred metres away, was the Belgian customs house, flanked by a traffic light.

‘If you would care to come in ...’

On the glass panes of the door there were transparent stickers advertising brass-cleaning creams. A bell rang.

And from the doorway, they were wrapped in warmth, an indefinable atmosphere, quiet and syrupy and dominated by smells. But what were the smells? There was a hint of cinnamon and a darker note of ground coffee. There was also a smell of paraffin, but with a whiff of genever.

An electric lightbulb, just one. Behind the dark-brown-painted wooden counter a white-haired woman in a black blouse was talking in Flemish to a barge woman. The latter was carrying a child in her arms.

‘Please come this way, inspector ...’

Maigret had had time to see shelves filled with goods. He had particularly noticed, at the end of the counter, the part that had a zinc top, some bottles tipped with tin spouts, containing eau de vie.

He didn't have time to stop. Another glass door, with a curtain. They passed through the kitchen. An old man was sitting in a wicker armchair, right against the stove.

'This way ...'

A colder corridor. Another door. And it was an unexpected room, half drawing room, half dining room, with a piano, a violin case, a carefully waxed parquet floor, comfortable furniture and reproductions of paintings on the walls.

'Give me your coat.'

The table was laid: a tablecloth with a wide check, silver cutlery and fine china cups.

'You'll have something to drink, won't you?'

Maigret's coat was already in the corridor, and Anna came back in a white silk blouse that made her look even less girlish.

And yet she had a full figure. So why that lack of femininity? It was impossible to imagine her in love. Even harder to imagine a man in love with her.

Everything was prepared in advance. She brought in a steaming coffee pot. She filled three cups. After disappearing again, she came back with a rice tart.

'Sit down, inspector ... My mother is on her way ...'

'Are you the pianist?'

'Me and my sister ... But she has less time than I do. She marks homework in the evening.'

'And the violin?'

'My brother ...'

'Isn't he in Givet?'

'He'll be here shortly ... I told him you were coming ...'

She sliced the tart. She served her guest, without asking him whether he wanted anything. Madame Peeters came in, her hands folded over her stomach, and with a shy smile of welcome on her face, a smile full of melancholy and resignation.

'Anna told me you'd agreed ...'

She was more Flemish than her daughter and still had a slight accent. But she had very fine features, and her surprisingly white hair gave her a certain nobility. She sat down on the edge of her chair, like a woman who is used to being disturbed.

‘You must be hungry, after your journey ... As for myself, I haven’t had an appetite since ...’

Maigret thought of the old man who was still in the kitchen. Why didn’t he come and have some tart as well? At that very moment, Madame Peeters said to her daughter:

‘Bring your father a piece ...’

And, to Maigret:

‘He hardly ever leaves his armchair now. He barely knows what’s going on.’

Everything about the atmosphere was the opposite of a drama. It was as if the worst events could happen outside, without disturbing the peace and quiet of the Flemish house, in which there was not a speck of dust, not the slightest draught, no sound but the roar of the stove.

And Maigret asked, as he ate the heavy tart:

‘What day was it exactly?’

‘January the third. A Wednesday.’

‘It’s the twentieth now ...’

‘Yes, we weren’t accused immediately ...’

‘That girl ... What did you say her name was?’

‘Germaine Piedboeuf. She came at about eight o’clock in the evening. She came into the shop, and it was my mother who received her.’

‘What did she want?’

Madame Peeters looked as if she was wiping a tear from her eyelid.

‘The same as ever. To complain that Joseph never went to see her, never got in touch ... A boy who works so hard! It’s to his credit, I assure you, that he’s continuing his studies in spite of everything ...’

‘Did she stay here for long?’

‘Perhaps five minutes. I had to tell her not to shout. The sailors could have heard her. Anna came and told her it would be a good idea for her to leave ...’

‘And did she leave?’

‘Anna led her outside. I went back into the kitchen and cleared the table.’

‘And you haven’t seen her again since then?’

‘Never!’

‘No one around here has met her?’

‘They all say they haven’t!’

‘Did she threaten to commit suicide?’

‘No! Women of that kind never kill themselves. More coffee? A piece of cake? Anna made it.’

A new feature to be added to the image of Anna. She was sitting calmly on her chair. She watched the inspector as if their roles had been swapped, as if she belonged to the Quai des Orfèvres, and he to the Flemish house.

‘Do you remember what you did that evening?’

It was Anna who replied, with a sad smile.

‘We have been asked about this so many times that we’ve had to remember the tiniest details. After coming home, I went up to my room to get some wool to knit with. When I came down, my sister was at the piano, in this room, and Marguerite had just arrived.’

‘Marguerite?’

‘Our cousin. The daughter of Dr Van de Weert. They live in Givet. I should tell you straight away, since you’ll find out anyway, that she’s Joseph’s fiancée.’

Madame Peeters got up with a sigh, because the bell had rung in the shop.

She could be heard speaking Flemish, in an almost playful voice, and weighing out beans or peas.

‘It was a source of great pain to my mother. It had been decided long since that Joseph and Marguerite would get married. They had got engaged at sixteen. But Joseph had to finish his studies. That was when that child came along.’

‘And in spite of that they expected to get married?’

‘No! Except that Marguerite didn’t want to marry anyone else. They still loved each other.’

‘Did Germaine Piedboeuf know that?’

‘Yes! But she was counting on getting married! So much so that my brother, to have a bit of peace, had promised he would. The wedding was to be held after his exams.’

And the bell in the shop rang. Madame Peeters tottered through the kitchen.

‘I was asking you what happened on the evening of the third.’

‘Yes. I was saying that when I came downstairs my sister and Marguerite were in this room. We played the piano until half past ten. My father had gone to bed at nine, as usual. My sister and I walked Marguerite to the bridge.’

‘And you didn’t meet anyone?’

‘No one. It was cold. We came back. The next day we didn’t suspect a thing. That afternoon people were saying that Germaine Piedboeuf had disappeared. It was only two days later that people thought of accusing us, because someone had seen her coming in here. The police chief called us in, then your colleague from Nancy. Apparently Monsieur Piedboeuf made a complaint. They searched the house, the cellar, the sheds, everything. They even dug up the garden.’

‘Wasn’t your brother in Givet on the third?’

‘No! He only comes on Saturdays, on his motorbike. Rarely on any other weekday. The whole town is against us, because we are Flemish and have some money.’

A note of pride in her voice. Or rather a superior degree of confidence.

‘You can’t imagine all the things they made up.’

Again the bell in the shop rang, then the sound of a young voice:

‘It’s me! Don’t disturb yourselves on my account ...’

Hurried footsteps. A very feminine figure swept into the dining room, stopping abruptly in front of Maigret.

‘Oh! Excuse me. I didn’t know ...’

‘Inspector Maigret, who’s come to help us. My cousin Marguerite.’

A little gloved hand in Maigret’s paw. And a nervous smile.

‘Anna told me you’d accepted ...’

She was very elegant, more elegant than pretty. Her face was framed by blonde, slightly wavy hair.

‘I gather you were playing the piano.’

‘Yes. Music is my only love. Especially when I’m sad ...’

And she smiled like one of the pretty girls on an advertising calendar. Lips in a pout, a veiled expression, her face leaning slightly forwards ...

‘Maria isn’t back?’

‘No! Her train must be late.’

The fragile chair creaked when Maigret tried to cross his legs.

‘What time did you get here on the third?’

‘Half past eight. Perhaps a little earlier. We eat early. My father had friends for bridge.’

‘Was the weather the same as today?’

‘It was raining. It rained for a whole week.’

‘Was the Meuse already in spate?’

‘It was starting to be. But the barriers weren’t knocked over until the fifth or the sixth. There were still trains of barges on the water.’

‘A piece of cake, inspector? No? A cigar, then?’

Anna held out a box of Belgian cigars and murmured as if in apology:

‘It isn’t contraband. Part of the house is in Belgium and part in France.’

‘So your brother, at least, is completely ruled out because he was in Nancy.’

Anna said stubbornly:

‘Not even that! Because of a drunk who claims to have seen him riding his bike along the quay. He said that a fortnight later. As if he could remember! It was Gérard, Germaine Piedboeuf’s brother, who found him. There’s not much to do around here. So he spends his time looking for witnesses. Just think, they want to bring a civil case and claim 300,000 francs.’

‘Where’s the child?’

Madame Peeters could be heard hurrying into the shop, where the bell had rung. Anna put the cake on the side table and set the coffee pot down on the stove.

‘Their house!’

And the voice of a sailor ordering some genever burst from behind the partition wall.

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